

## The legitimacy and sustainability of ISIS Caliphate?

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The militant Muslim group in Syria and Iraq, formerly known as ISIS or ISIL,<sup>1</sup> is a Sunni extremist, jihadist, organization. Having captured territory in parts of Syria and Iraq, they have rebranded themselves as The Islamic State or IS. Proclaiming the establishment of Caliphate, their leader has declared himself the Caliph. Skillfully exploiting the symbolic figure of caliph to increase his legitimacy, he added “al-Qurayshi” – the name of Prophet Mohammad’s tribe – to his name. The unashamed brutality practiced by IS since its formation and consequent to the establishment of their Caliphate has terrified governments around the world. Their evil exploitation of Islamic terminology for usurping power has also shocked some in the Muslim world.

In the face of widespread condemnation and military action by a coalition of Western and Muslim countries to stop their advances, IS has succeeded in gaining support from disgruntled soldiers of the Saddam regime<sup>2</sup> and the US armed and trained Sunni militant groups who were later shunned by the Shia dominated Maliki regime in Iraq. Several radicalized Muslim groups, e.g., Taliban factions in Pakistan, have pledged allegiance to the IS Caliphate<sup>3</sup> and hundreds of people, from several countries, are reported to have joined ISIS (Figure 1.)<sup>4</sup>

While many Muslim countries have supported and propagated misrepresented Islamic doctrines for political purposes, their policy U-turn after IS’ startling successes is not enough to convince radicalized groups who also sympathize with IS type ideologies to reverse course. The fruits of this decades-long, deliberate, and widespread misinformation campaign in the Muslim world were captured by a recent Pew Research data<sup>5</sup> which showed the prevalent confusion about doctrines like jihad, sharia, blasphemy and apostasy. Many in Muslim-majority countries favor the implementation of legislative sharia, jihad as a justification for war and capital punishment of blasphemy and apostasy. These misinterpretations forms the bedrock for the violent ideology practiced by IS, Taliban, al-Qaida and similar radicalized groups.

These mixed messages of military action on the one hand and Muslim volunteers supporting IS on the other has baffled people about the legitimacy and sustainability of the IS Caliphate. This article will contrast the Islamic concept of Caliphate with the IS model and highlight their differences. This comparison is critically important to realize how IS and similar groups have tried to dupe people into believing their “Islamic” credentials.

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<sup>1</sup> Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (Syria) aka ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Levant) or IS (Islamic State)

<sup>2</sup> The de-Bathification process after the US occupation of Iraq essentially disenfranchised the Iraqi armed forces who later joined IS.

<sup>3</sup> <http://online.wsj.com/articles/pakistani-taliban-leaders-pledge-allegiance-to-islamic-state-1413283423>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29372494>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview/> (formally known as the REPORT of THE COURT OF INQUIRY constituted under PUNJAB ACT II OF 1954 to enquire into the PUNJAB DISTURBANCES OF 1953. This report is also referred to as the Munir Commission Report.)

## The concept of Caliphate in Islam

The Arabic word *Khilafat* (Caliphate) means succession; the person heading the organization is known as the *Khalifa* (caliph) or the successor to a prophet of God. In Islamic parlance, Caliphate is thus an extension of prophethood because the caliphs continue the task of reformation that was initiated by the Prophet. Reformation and moral training of the people and society is a monumental proposition and cannot be completed during the prophet's life time. The Qur'an refers to the institution of *Khilafat*<sup>6</sup> and mentions the following kinds of Khalifas:

1. Prophets such as Adam<sup>7</sup> and David,<sup>8</sup> termed both as His vice-regents (successor).
2. Prophet Moses<sup>9</sup> and other Israelite prophets were classified as khalifas of Moses. ("We have sent down the Torah wherein was guidance and light. By it did the prophets who were obedient to Us judge for the Jews".)
3. Non-prophet khalifas<sup>10</sup> of a prophet, with or without temporal powers ("godly people learned in the Law. Their mission is to protect and preserve the law from being tampered with.")

The relationship between *khilafat* and Prophethood, in Arabic, is described as *khilafat-ala-minhaj-e-nabuwwat*, (*khilafat* on the lines of Prophethood). The Prophet's true successors would thus follow his example and guide believers towards the same objectives. The Holy Quran enumerates the following four functions of the Prophet.<sup>11</sup>

1. Recital of God's verses/signs to establish firmness of faith in the existence of One God and to worship Him alone.
2. Purification of souls by bringing gradual moral and spiritual changes in human conduct by creating mutual love, sympathy and unity among the believers, and by eradicating sinful inclination.
3. Teaching the Book, that is, the Holy Quran which contains God's Law and commandments to establish a just and benevolent society.

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<sup>6</sup> Allah had promised to those among you who believe and do good works that He will surely make them Successors in the earth, as He made Successors from among those who were before them; and that He will surely establish for them their religion which He has chosen for them; and that He will surely give them in exchange security and peace after their fear: They will worship Me, and they will not associate anything with Me. Then whoso is ungrateful after that, they will be the rebellious. (Qur'an 24, v 56).

<sup>7</sup> And when thy Lord said to the angels: 'I am about to place a vicegerent in the earth,' they said: 'Wilt Thou place therein such as will cause disorder in it, and shed blood? — and we glorify Thee with Thy praise and extol Thy holiness.' He answered: 'I know what you know not.' (Qur'an Ch 2, v 31)

<sup>8</sup> 'O David, We have made thee a vicegerent in the earth; so judge between men with justice, and follow not vain desire, lest it should lead thee astray from the way of Allah.' Surely those who go astray from the way of Allah will have a severe punishment, because they forgot the Day of Reckoning. (Qur'an Ch 38, v 27)

<sup>9</sup> Surely, We sent down the Torah wherein was guidance and light. By it did the Prophets, who were obedient to Us, judge for the Jews, as did the godly people and those learned in the Law; for they were required to preserve the Book of Allah, and because they were guardians over it. Therefore fear not men but fear Me; and barter not My Signs for a paltry price. And whoso judges not by that which Allah has sent down, these it is who are the disbelievers. (Qur'an Ch 5, v 45)

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> "We have sent to you a Messenger from among you, who recites Our verses/signs (*ayaat*) to you, and purifies you, and teaches you the Book and wisdom, and teaches you that which you knew not" (Qur'an Ch 2, v 152).

4. Teaching wisdom that underlies natural and social laws to increase human knowledge.

These four objectives – spiritual, moral, societal and intellectual enhancement of mankind – continue to be the main objectives of the righteous and “rightly guided” khilafat in the footsteps of the Prophet of Islam. The Islamic institution of Caliphate is thus an embodiment of God’s unity. The Caliphate is Islam has to be divinely guided and would not be based on the use of force and brutality.

### The Islamic State Caliphate

The Islamic State (IS), is the first and so far the only attempt to resurrect the ‘engineered’ governmental system of the early Muslims through the use of force and coercion. Similar attempts have failed to gain traction of this engineered system that was first proposed in 1928 by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and by Jama’at-e-Islami in undivided India. Many Muslims believe the radicals’ interpretation that caliphate as a divinely sanctioned system of religious monarchy that invests power in the hands of the caliph, who has the sole authority to declare jihad, implement sharia, and to interpret Islamic texts. Many aspirants of political caliphate, including Osama bin Laden, his successor Zawahiri, and the Taliban commanders have called themselves as *Amir al-Mu'minin* or Commander of the Believers. Their model of Islamic State is shown in Figure 2; their motivation for the creation of Islamic State is to grab power and implement their twisted versions of legislative sharia, violent jihad, blasphemy and apostasy. The destructive consequences, both intended and unintended, of this ideology are discussed elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, none of these foundational principles are from the Five Pillars<sup>13</sup> or the Articles of Faith<sup>14</sup> in Islam.

### Discussion

Except for the terminology there is nothing in common between the concept of real Caliphate in Islam and that established by IS. Their practices and pronouncements are contrary to Qur’anic injunction of “no compulsion in religion”<sup>15</sup> and the acknowledgement of human diversity (by referring to division of people into tribes)<sup>16</sup> rules out the use of force for enforcing religion<sup>17</sup>. Likewise, Islam precludes the need for uniformity in cultural and social practices as long as they are not in conflict with the fundamental religions teachings. There are no words to condemn IS’ abhorrent pronouncement about Slavery in Islam and their boasts of selling captive women as concubines.<sup>18</sup> One of the first things Islam abolished was slavery and IS takes pride in resurrecting that repulsive concept. Islam equates the killing

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.circleofpeaceonline.org/?s=Munir+Commission+Report>

<sup>13</sup> Affirmation (kalima), Obligatory prayers (namaz), Fasting (roza), Charity (zakat), and Pilgrimage (Haj)

<sup>14</sup> Belief in One God, Angels, all prophets, all revealed books, predestination, Day of Judgement.

<sup>15</sup> There should be no compulsion in religion. Surely, right has become distinct from wrong; so whosoever refuses to be led by those who transgress, and believes in Allah, has surely grasped a strong handle which knows no breaking. And Allah is All-Hearing, All-Knowing (Qur’an Ch 2, v 257)

<sup>16</sup> O mankind, We have created you from a male and a female; and We have made you into tribes and sub-tribes that you may recognize one another. Verily, the most honorable among you, in the sight of Allah, is he who is the most righteous among you. Surely, Allah is All-knowing, All-Aware. (Qur’an Ch 49, v 14)

<sup>17</sup> Admonish, therefore, for thou art but an admonisher; Thou hast no authority to compel them. (Qur’an Ch 88, v 22-23)

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.economist.com/node/21625870/print>

of one innocent individual as being equivalent to killing the entire humankind and saving one individual akin to saving the entire humankind.<sup>19</sup> How can the IS terrorists who have killed people in large numbers and in the most brutal way claim to be the divinely appointed authority among Muslims when they do not conform to the principles of the faith?

In an Islamic Caliphate, believers voluntarily choose to obey the caliph whose role is to establish God's authority to continue nurturing the faith and practices, and preventing its corruption. Moreover, the caliph's role is to interpret the finer points of the faith and provide spiritual guidance to enable people and societies to evolve from the instinctive stage and gradually transform to the moral and ultimately to the spiritual stage<sup>20</sup> (Figure 3). The institution of caliphate in Islam can only be spiritual; governmental politics and using the ideology to grab power has no place in a truly Islamic Caliphate.

Prophet Mohammad himself practiced the above Qur'anic injunctions when he developed the Charter or Constitution of Medina after migration from Mecca in 620 CE. He established the first community of people with diverse beliefs and allowed equal rights and responsibilities to all group. This is discussed in detail elsewhere<sup>21</sup> and should serve as the model for any subsequent "Islamic State" to follow.

The first caliphate in Islam was established immediately after the Prophet's death in 632 CE and lasted till about 661 CE and was known as the Righteous Caliphate. Later, it became political and dynastic e.g., Umayyads (661-750 CE), the Abbasids (750-1258 CE) who developed legislative sharia to institute a Qur'an compliant system of laws that would evolve amid continuing consultations and discussions between scholars and legislators. They were followed by the Ottomans (1453-1924 CE), and for relatively short periods by other, competing dynasties in al-Andalus, North Africa, and Egypt. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded the Republic of Turkey and formally abolished the system of dynastic Caliphate. The dynastic caliphates were thus formed and terminated by humans; these were political and not spiritual entities.

IS originated as a terrorist group *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* in 1999 and later became known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and led the Iraqi insurgency against US-led forces following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In 2006, it joined other Sunni insurgent groups to form the *Mujahideen Shura* Council, which consolidated further into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). In April 2013, the group changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. It grew significantly under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, gaining support in Iraq as a result of perceived economic and political discrimination against Iraqi Sunnis.<sup>22</sup> After entering the Syrian Civil War, it established its presence in the Syrian governorates of Ar-Raqqah, Idlib, Deir ez-Zor and Aleppo.<sup>23</sup> In June 2014, IS had at least 4,000 fighters in its ranks in

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<sup>19</sup> On account of this, We prescribed for the children of Israel that whosoever killed a person — unless it be for killing a person or for creating disorder in the land — it shall be as if he had killed all mankind; and whoso gave life to one, it shall be as if he had given life to all mankind. And Our Messengers came to them with clear Signs, yet even after that, many of them commit excesses in the land. (Qur'an Ch 5, v 33)

<sup>20</sup> Qur'an Ch 16, v 91

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.circleofpeaceonline.org/?s=Jewish+Muslim+relationship>

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syria-tribal-revolt-against-islamic-state-ignored-fueling-resentment/2014/10/20/25401beb-8de8-49f2-8e64-c1cfbee45232\\_story.html?hpid=z1](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syria-tribal-revolt-against-islamic-state-ignored-fueling-resentment/2014/10/20/25401beb-8de8-49f2-8e64-c1cfbee45232_story.html?hpid=z1)

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/islamic-law-comes-to-rebel-held-syria/2013/03/19/b310532e-90af-11e2-bdea-e32ad90da239\\_print.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/islamic-law-comes-to-rebel-held-syria/2013/03/19/b310532e-90af-11e2-bdea-e32ad90da239_print.html)

Iraq;<sup>24</sup> in September 2014 the CIA estimated their numbers to be between 20,000–31,500 fighters.<sup>25</sup> IS had close links to al-Qaeda until February 2014 after which it severed ties with al-Qaida due to a power struggle.<sup>26, 27</sup>

The group's original aim was to establish an Islamic state in the Sunni-majority regions of Iraq. Following its involvement in the Syrian Civil War, this expanded to include controlling Sunni-majority areas of Syria.<sup>28</sup> It proclaimed a worldwide caliphate on 29 June 2014; its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the Caliph, and the group renamed itself as the Islamic State.<sup>29</sup> It claims religious authority over all Muslims worldwide, and aims to bring most Muslim-inhabited regions of the world under its political control, beginning with the Levant region, which approximately covers Syria, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Cyprus, and part of southern Turkey.<sup>30, 31</sup>

### Concluding Comments

The IS model of an Islamic State is a myth. Its foundation (legislative sharia, violent jihad, blasphemy, and apostasy) is based on misrepresented and politically motivated interpretations which are contrary to the Qur'anic teachings. Moreover, the foundational concepts are neither the Five Pillars of Islam nor the Articles of faith which form the core of Islam. Such an Islamic State – a monolithic state based on Sunni extremist interpretation where people are forced to conform – has never existed in Islamic history nor will ever exist. There is no possibility of such state being divinely guided or inspired. The illegitimate state formed by IS will not be sustainable.

The true Islamic Caliphate will be spiritual and follow the Qur'anic teachings as practiced by the Holy Prophet with the objective of reforming individuals and societies gradually raising them from instinctive to moral and then to spiritual states of being. People will be invited, but not forced, to partner in that transformation. If an Islamic State ever existed, that would be the State of Medina formed by the Holy Prophet; its citizenry included Jews, Christians, Pagans, and Muslims. Its Charter or Constitution guaranteed equal rights and responsibilities to all citizens irrespective of their faith.

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<sup>24</sup> <http://online.wsj.com/articles/jessica-lewis-the-terrorist-army-marching-on-baghdad-1402614950>

<sup>25</sup> <http://news.yahoo.com/20-000-31-500-fighters-iraq-syria-cia-230059844.html>

<sup>26</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html)

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/iraq-turmoil/more-extreme-al-qaeda-how-isis-compares-other-terror-groups-n135516>

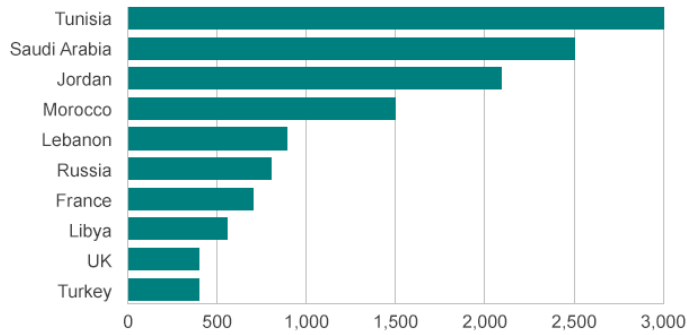
<sup>28</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/battle-to-establish-islamic-state-across-iraq-and-syria-9510044.html>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-declares-new-islamic-state-in-middle-east-with-abu-bakr-albaghdadi-as-emir-removing-iraq-and-syria-from-its-name-9571374.html>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28082962>

<sup>31</sup> <http://blogs.wsj.com/briefly/2014/06/12/islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-the-short-answer/>

**Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq**



Sources: Soufan Group, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence  
Upper estimates used.

Figure 1. Estimates of foreign jihadis supporting IS (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29372494>)

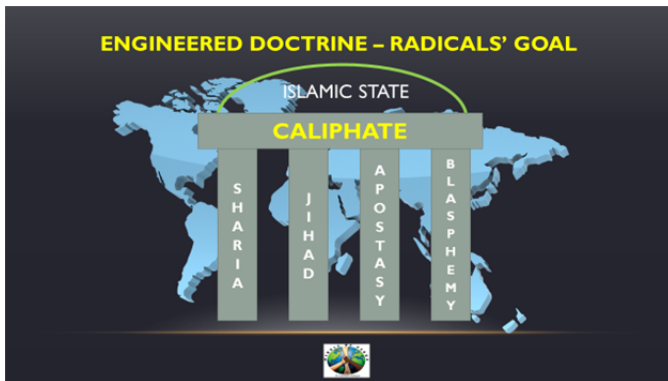


Figure 2. IS' and other Radical groups' model for Islamic State and Caliphate

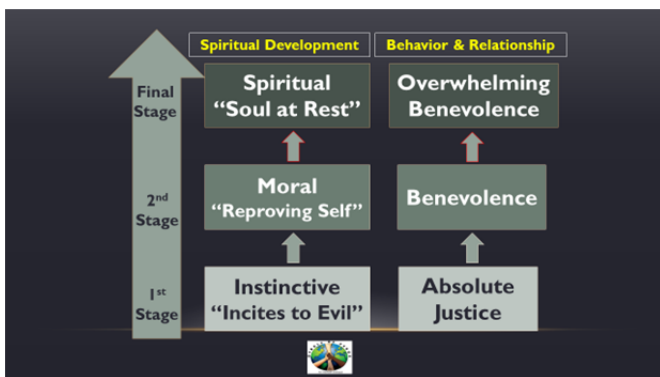


Figure 3. Objective of Islam's teachings is gradual transformation of people and societies from the instinctive to the moral and ultimately to the spiritual stage