



De-Romanticizing the Islamic State's Vision of the Caliphate

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Calls for restoration of the Caliphate are a regular feature of Islamist extremist communication, most recently and notably that of the Islamic State (IS) who in mid-2014 declared a new Caliphate and named their leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as Caliph. This paper analyzes the extremist vision of the Caliphate from a strategic communication point of view, revealing its vulnerability.

Extremists construct a narrative of an ideal system of government that will unite all Muslims under God's just rule. This narrative is comprised of stories that romanticize previous Caliphates and claim they were undermined by Western powers bent on subjugating the Muslims and destroying Islam. The solution to this downward spiral is restoration of the Caliphate, which will throw off the yoke of oppression and realize the divine plan for all Muslims. Therefore, it is every Muslim's duty to work toward this goal by abandoning false national identities designed to divide them, and join the fight.

This narrative relies on the three important devices. First, it depends on an *imagined community* of Muslims that is united across the world—i.e. one in which Muslims who do not even know one another nonetheless identify with one another because of their “Muslimness.” Imagined communities normally depend on institutions of the state for their cohesion. But the extremist narrative rejects the notion of states, so the vision of the Caliphate itself becomes the basis for imagining a unified ummah. This requires the second device, *unified diversity*, where an idea of the Caliphate is presented in a general way everyone can agree with, while suppressing talk about details—for example, who should be Caliph—that might surface differences in interpretation, causing disagreement and conflict. To achieve unified diversity, extremists depend on the third device, a *romanticized history* of the Caliphate. They portray the Caliphate as a glorious, shining kingdom on a hill, while editing out inconvenient historical details about the infighting, assassination, civil war, and territorial losses that plagued the Caliphates from the time of Muhammad's death.

We propose three measures to counter the extremist narrative of the Caliphate: (1) De-romanticize the Caliphate by promoting knowledge of its true history; (2) deconstruct the imagined community by emphasizing the real differences in interests, beliefs, and religious practices among Muslims in different parts of the world; and (3) challenge unified diversity by raising questions about who is qualified to be Caliph, and how this person is to be found among 1.6 billion Muslims.

INTRODUCTION

On June 29, 2014, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, spokesman for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, and more recently simply “The Islamic State” (IS), announced the restoration of the Caliphate and named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, IS’s leader, as the new Caliph.¹ This makes al-Baghdadi the first Caliph since the reign of Abdulmecid II ended in 1924.

Whether or not Muslims, specifically likeminded extremists, will accept al-Baghdadi and this new Caliphate remains to be seen. Militant Islamists have been talking of restoring the Caliphate for over a decade; however, the reality of the Caliphate—an institution of Islamic governance that flourished for several centuries after the passing of the Prophet Muhammad—is not what is typically depicted in extremist strategic communication.

The reality of the Caliphate is not what is typically depicted in extremist strategic communication

The idea of the Caliphate as it appears in extremist discourse should not be conflated with a modern nation-state. It differs from a generalized Islamic state within current socio-political borders such as the Taliban created in Afghanistan. It is also distinct from other models of Islamic states such as Sudan or Iran. Indeed, as we discuss in detail below, the extremist’s portrayal of the Caliphate supplants the idea of the modern nation state with an imagined community based on a strategically ambiguous understanding of an all-encompassing “Islamic” identity.

The Center for Strategic Communication has developed a database containing over 5000 texts collected from various Islamist extremist sources. These texts consist of officially released statements, such as those coming from al-Qaeda, as well as comments made by individuals on Islamist websites and forums. These texts are drawn from groups based in the Middle East, North Africa and Southeast Asia. Of those, over 400 (roughly ten percent) make mention of the Caliph or Caliphate. Given this frequency, it seemed prudent to conduct a closer analysis of the role that the idea of the Caliphate plays in extremist discourse.

Historically, the Caliphate is generally considered to have existed in one form or another from 632 to 1924. This period begins with the Rashidun Caliphate or Rightly Guided Caliphs following Muhammad’s passing. It ends with the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate and the secularization of Turkey under Kemal Ataturk.

In extremist discourse, the idea of the Caliphate is constructed through a narrative that sanitizes and romanticizes the history of the institution, situates its place in Islamic society, and calls for its restoration.

Unsurprisingly, this constructed ideal ignores much of the historical reality

intrinsic to any governing institution, especially one that spanned several centuries. Broadly speaking, the narrative of the Caliphate as it appears in extremist discourse contains the following elements:

- The Caliphate was an ideal system of government implemented by the Rightly Guided Caliphs that united all Muslims under God’s just rule.
- The loss of the Caliphate (either referring to the 1924 Ottoman Caliphate or an earlier period) allowed Western colonial powers and other threats to dominate and oppress the ummah, doing irreparable harm to Muslim lands and Islam as a religion.
- The restoration of the Caliphate will unite all Muslims, regardless of nationality, ethnicity etc, enable them to throw off their oppression by Western forces, and realize God’s justice.
- Therefore it is the duty of all Muslims to work toward the restoration of the Caliphate.

The following analysis examines the idea of the Caliphate that is constructed through extremist strategic communication using both broad generalizations and references to specific historical instances. First we give an overview of how the narrative of the Caliphate is constructed. We then discuss the function of that narrative as it serves to create an ‘imagined community,’ which rejects the modern nation-state model of governance and which extremists then use, in part, to justify their actions. Lastly we highlight just how and where extremists abuse the history of the Caliphate by differentiating between reality and the romanticized version presented by the extremists.

THE NARRATIVE

The Ideal Caliphate

Islamist extremists paint a grossly idealistic portrait of the Caliphate

Many modern Islamist extremists paint a grossly idealistic portrait of the Caliphate as a form of governance. This romantic portrayal extends not only to the Caliphate as a governing institution, but its ability to function as uniting force for the whole of the ummah, overcoming “false” differences in identity based on nationality or ethnicity. These impressive traits are generally ascribed to its supposed Divine origins:

It is the Divine system, the Islamic system, the system where there is no injustice or flaws...It is the Islamic Caliphate which gives you the freedom to live in all Muslim countries, where there is no discrimination between Arabs and non-Arabs, and where there is no discrimination based on color or nationality. It is not Arab nor regional, rather, it is Islamic.²

By portraying the Caliphate in such a way, extremists reinforce the idea of a monolithic and united Muslim community, obscuring not only historic

divisions of ethnicity, nationality and creed, but modern diversity among Muslims as well. This step is necessary because in extremist rhetoric the Caliphate is a singular institution, encompassing the entire world's Muslim population under its umbrella. Accepting the current diversity of Muslim cultures across the world makes the probability of a single governing body exceptionally unlikely. Acknowledging that diversity also significantly weakens extremist's claims that they are acting on behalf of 'the ummah.' Further, as we explain below, this strategy allows the justification of violent action on behalf of that community.

The Collapse

Consistent with the narrative arc,³ since the Caliphate is perceived as an ideal form of government, extremist discourse portrays its ending as a catastrophe which weakened Islam and allowed outside forces to do irreparable harm to the unity of the ummah and Islam as a whole:

The worst catastrophe that befell the Ummah was the collapse of the Caliphate that was defending the religion of Muslims and managing their life according to the Sharia. The Ummah was controlled by a group of agent rulers who implemented the plots of the Jews and the Christians against the Ummah of Islam in order to disturb it from within and destroy it from without: to destroy its creed, ideas, culture and manners. They are destroying every seed that can be planted in the righteous soil of the Ummah. They are fighting its righteous sons who want God's word to be superior and religion to be only from God⁴

Extremists portray the end of the Caliphate as a catastrophe and Muslims as victims

Unsurprisingly, in the modern context, the outside forces most commonly viewed as threatening the ummah are the United States and its Western allies who are often labeled, as in the passage above, "the Jews and Crusaders." This aspect of the narrative of the Caliphate closely parallels and supports the themes of victimization found in previous analyses by the CSC.⁵

The theme of catastrophe also contains significant elements of betrayal. Forces within Islam acted traitorously, leading to an outside threat conquering or damaging the Caliphate. This includes stories of both historical and contemporary contexts. Foreign invasion is also central to these stories.

In the historical context, betrayal is exemplified by the sacking of Baghdad by the Mongol leader Hulagu Khan in 1258. One of the Caliph's viziers, Ibn al- Alqami, apparently betrayed the Abbasid Caliph, al-Musta'sim. Al-Alqami had been in contact with Hulagu Khan and assured him an easy victory in Baghdad. Al-Alqami lied to the Caliph about the size of the Mongol army and convinced al-Musta'sim not to gather reinforcements or properly prepare the city for a massive assault. Al-

Alqami was Shia and supposedly wanted to eliminate the Caliph and establish a Shia state in the region.

The result [of the betrayal] was the collapse of the state of the Islamic Caliphate, and allowing the most arrogant and dirtiest military power at that time to practice its dominant influence over the Sunnis. In other words, such an act helped them [the Mongols] slaughter the Sunnis in the ugliest forms; they slaughtered around 800,000 residents to the extent that their blood was shed in the streets of Baghdad...⁶

The narrative reinforces the extremist framing of the Iraq War

In texts referring to current events, the narrative reinforces the extremist framing of the Iraq War. A Muslim (Ahmed Chalabi or Nouri al-Maliki depending on the text) betrays the government in Baghdad and allows a foreign invader (George W. Bush) to conquer the country.

The United States came to Baghdad, holding in its hand the sword of treachery that was handed to it by the grandsons of Ibn-al-Alqami, who handed Baghdad to the Mongols and opened its gates to their armies to occupy it.⁷

Just as Hulagu [Khan] entered Baghdad, so did the criminal Bush enter it, through Al-Alqami.⁸

The other common context in which events surrounding the Caliphate are framed as a catastrophe refers to the secularization of Turkey in 1924 by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, which is often discussed as the “fall” of the Ottoman Caliphate. Virtually every text that refers to the Ottoman Caliphate does so within the context of its collapse. Oppression by foreign powers and the betrayal by an apostate leader are also central themes in stories concerning this period. For example:

Europe only left Istanbul to Kemal Ataturk after the Treaty of Lausanne, the conditions of which were:

1. That Turkey would abolish the Islamic Caliphate exiling the Caliph from Turkey, and seizing his possessions.
2. That Turkey would subdue every movement made by supporters of the Caliphate.
3. That Turkey would sever its ties to Islam.
4. That Turkey would select for itself a civil constitution rather than a constitution based on the provisions of Islam.

Kemal Ataturk implemented the above conditions, and the occupying nations withdrew from Turkey. At that time, British Foreign Secretary [George] Curzon said before the British House of Commons: "The point at issue is that Turkey has been destroyed and shall never rise again because we have destroyed her spiritual power: the Caliphate and Islam." That was in 1924."⁹

The significance of the Ottoman Caliphate is that it ends. This collapse is one of the master narratives detailed in the CSC book, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*. In the book, Halverson, Goodall, and Corman suggest that the dissolution of the Caliphate in 1924 is seen by Islamist extremists as “a grand ruse and sinister conspiracy against Islam.”¹⁰ This narrative suggests that Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the Ottoman general and founder of modern Turkey, was in reality secretly Jewish and in league with Zionists to end the Caliphate. That combined with the Sykes-Picot agreement, which planned for the division of Arab lands after the end of World War I, allows the extremists to paint a picture of a Western-Jewish-Christian plot against the Muslims that destroyed the divine system of governance that ensured justice and peace for all Muslims.

Since that time, according to extremist discourse, Muslim lands, and Islam as a whole, have been in decline and under constant threat from outside, primarily Western, forces that threaten the ‘Islamic’ way of life. In order to bring about an end to this threat and the situation of oppression by non-Muslim forces occupying Muslim lands, extremists call for the restoration of the Caliphate.

Restoration

Once restored, the Caliphate will serve as a liberating and protecting force, helping Muslims throw off their oppression

The narrative of the Caliphate begins with its creation, followed by its ideal state, and finally stories of its decline and collapse. This creates a deficiency that anchors a new narrative, projected into the future, which calls for restoration. According to the narrative arc, this restoration will reverse the decline, leading back to the previous ideal state. Once again, all Muslims will be united under its aegis, thereby destroying the false boundaries of nationality imposed on them by Western governments. Once restored, the Caliphate will serve as a liberating and protecting force, helping Muslims throw off their oppression by outsiders and restore God’s rule:

We are sacrificing all of this—and asking Allah to accept it from us—for our Ummah to win its freedom, dignity and honor and restore its Caliphate, which will implement justice, spread the Shura, protect the sacred things and preserve rights¹¹

It is therefore the duty of all the Muslims to work toward the restoration of the Caliphate, by violent action if necessary. This includes combating the far enemy (the United States and its allies) and rebelling against *munafiq* (hypocrites).¹² These leaders claim to be Muslim but in reality oppress fellow Muslims and may be allied with perceived Muslim enemies:

We ask Muslims to rise up against injustice and to join the mujahidin in their efforts for change. We ask them to fulfill God’s order of jihad against the non-belief, injustice, and oppression by Al-Aswad al-Ansi

agent gang [a reference to former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh]. This is the realistic and legitimate solution to end injustice and achieve rights. They need to put their hands in the hands of the mujahidin until God's law is applied, the religion is established, rights are returned, oppression is lifted, and a Caliphate is established.¹³

Additionally, Extremists also use the Caliphate to justify Muslim dominance over non-Muslims. For example:

“Do not exchange correspondence with the Dhimmis (Jews and Christians living under a contract of protection in Muslim lands) in case friendship should grow between you and them. Do not call them by their formal names. They must be kept in their place, but not wronged. Command their women not to tighten their waistbands, and not to let their forelocks hang over their faces. Also they should be made to stand in the marketplace so that they can be distinguished from Muslim women. If they refuse, they had better embrace Islam, willingly, or unwillingly.”

This passage, from the pen of our beloved Khalifah 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, will strike many of us as strange, because we have been so far removed from the reality of Islamic political dominance. However, this is the reality, whether we like it or not. Islam is meant to dominate.¹⁴

Extremists justify violence by painting the time of the Caliphate as idyllic, then telling stories set in that period

By painting the time of the Caliphate as idyllic, then telling stories from that period, extremists justify modern day violence. The violence that occurs today is no longer political violence; it is instead framed as keeping with the strongest and oldest traditions of Islam. Extremists even argue that the conflict that exists today is somehow divinely inspired or meant to be:

Can you see how he regards facing the enemy without even using his sword or throwing spears to be better than worshiping God for 60 years! Abu-al-Ghadyah al-Mu'zani said that he heard Uthman Ibn-Affan, may God be pleased with him, preaching the people of Medina by saying: "O people, why do you not take part in jihad for the sake of God?"

Do you find a preacher nowadays, who would say to people: "O people, why do you not take part in jihad for the sake of God?" Such preacher would be arrested and jailed right away. There is no might, nor power except from God.

Then, he [Uthman] said, as if he is living in our current time, do you not see your brothers in the Levant, do you not see your brothers in Egypt, do you not see your brothers in Iraq?"

The narrative of the Caliphate as detailed above serves a larger purpose in extremist discourse beyond merely looking at history with rose tinted lenses. By constructing the Caliphate as an ideal system of governance

that negates all potentially divisive identities within the broader Muslim community, extremists construct what Benedict Anderson terms an “imagined community.”

THE IMAGINED COMMUNITY OF THE UMMAH

Benedict Anderson’s theory of the *imagined community* says that a community can exist if people think they are part of it, even if there is no everyday face-to-face interaction between the members. Anderson uses “imagined” in the sense of “perceived,” not in the sense of “false” or “make believe.” The environment in which someone is born shapes the community of that person. According to Anderson, people who share a common currency, common language, military, police force, news outlets, entertainment media, and so on all develop a kinship with each other even if particular individuals never meet.

No individual American, for example, will ever know every other American, but all Americans think of themselves as part of an American community because of common elements of culture, language, institutions and so on. Because imagined communities depend on individual perceptions, they are flexible. People identify as Americans and are perceived as Americans no matter where they go in the world. This provides an instant measure of kinship among members of the imagined community of Americans, even if they have never met.

*Constructing the
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Islamist extremist groups—such as al Qaeda and IS— seek to create an imagined communication of Muslims too. But they actively reject the landscape of modern nation-states, viewing them as imposed by Western forces to the detriment of the ummah. They must construct an imagined community of a singular Islamic ummah without relying on the usual tools employed by—for example—nationalist oriented groups. There is no specifically “Muslim” currency, or Muslim military, or Muslim media, because these are inherently part of the current nation-state system and therefore differ across state or region. So they rely on the vision of the Caliphate to accomplish this. In other words, the Caliphate effectively bypasses the usual state-based features that would construct an imagined community.

Constructing the imagined community of the Caliphate relies on the principle of *unified diversity*.¹⁵ This is a tactic in which communicators present an idea in a general way that everyone can agree with, while avoiding details that might lead to differences in interpretation, causing disagreement and conflict. For example, prior to al-Baghdadi, extremists never named individuals who might be chosen to lead the Caliphate. Since the emergence of the Islamic State, only AQAP has announced support for the group, yet it did not refer to it as a Caliphate or to al-Baghdadi as the

Caliph.¹⁶ The narrative is strategically ambiguous, so a diverse audience can engage with it in diverse ways. Thus it can theoretically appeal to all Muslims regardless of nationality, ethnicity etc.

The idea of a Caliphate serves as a touchstone to create an imagined community among Muslims worldwide

The ideal outcome for extremists, then, is for Muslims all over the globe to identify themselves first and foremost as Muslims. This identity must supersede the existing national, regional, ethnic and cultural identities already in existence (i.e. Tunisian, Arab, or Wahhabi). The Caliphate may currently be regionally limited, but the *idea of a Caliphate* serves as a touchstone to create an imagined community among Muslims worldwide.

As discussed above, however, creation of this imagined community takes several steps. Romanticization is an emotional appeal to the heroic or the ideal. It is common, to romanticize war, for example through heroic depictions in movies or books. This leads to a sanitized view of war, which avoids its brutality and horrors, instead focusing on heroism and glory. The extremists attempt a similar transformation of the Caliphate, using three techniques. First, they glorify the historical Caliphate by removing any negative depiction of the institution and stressing how positive the Caliphate was for Muslims in the past—and can be for Muslims in the future. Second, they emphasize the collapse of the Caliphate, establishing a motivation to restore it by casting Muslims as victims. Third, they romanticize the Caliphate in an attempt to shift the loyalties and sense of community the audience feels at a nationalistic level to that of the Caliphate. Here they are creating the imagined Caliphate, the inspirational Caliphate. All of this is done, however, at the expense of truth. Next we explain how the historical Caliphate never functioned the way in which the extremist narrative depicts it.

THE HISTORICAL REALITY

Islamist extremists seek to portray an historical Caliphate that was ideal, just, and blessed by God. In this tale, the institution of the Caliphate was of great benefit to the Muslims of the era. For example:

Had not Al-Sahabah [the prophet's companions] sought death, those who defected after Prophet Muhammad's passing away would have triumphed over the good Caliphate State, Islam would have perished, and the entire world would have quickly fallen into the darkness of disbelief and paganism. Had it not been for scores of martyrs of the prophet's companions, Islam would not have spread in the world nor would the two greatest powers at that time have been defeated; namely, Persia and Rome, nor would have people entered "God's religion in crowds" [part of Koranic verse], nor would have jurisprudence been implemented, nor would have these many nations been liberated from their slavery to infidelity, injustice, and exploitation, nor would have you, who sit idle, embraced Islam. Instead, you have remained infidels and sons of infields

laboring in the mud of paganism which you were not liberated from but through the sacrifices of thousands of the prophet's companions, who thought little about their lives for the sake of God.¹⁷

This passage portrays the Prophet's companions as extraordinary people who worked together to improve the lives of Muslims. But the period following Muhammad's death was not as pure or as unified as the extremists would have us believe.

In reality, the reign of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (or Rashidun Caliphate) was plagued with conflict. First, there was no agreement on who would succeed the Prophet. Muhammad left no clear instruction on who was to take over leadership of the Muslim community upon his death. He had no sons that lived to adulthood, so passing leadership in a hereditary fashion meant that it would have to go to Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abu Talib. Not all of the *al-Sahaba* (Companions of the Prophet) agreed that Ali was the right man to lead. There was a fierce debate, and in the end Abu Bakr as-Siddiq was elected as the first *khalifah* (successor).

Abu Bakr's leadership was short-lived, and he served only two years. His primary function in that time was to keep the Muslim community from fracturing. A number of Arab tribes who had submitted to Muhammad claimed that their allegiance died with the Prophet and began to break away from the larger Muslim community. Abu Bakr countered that they had submitted not just to a man, but to a people and a community, which Abu Bakr now led. This disagreement led to the Ridda War, or "Wars of Apostasy."

Abu Bakr proved successful in keeping the Muslim community together. However, this incident shows that there were serious difficulties with the Caliphate from its inception, a fact that modern Islamist extremists seem keen to ignore. First, there was disagreement over who should lead and second, there were those who completely disputed the authority of the Caliph. None of this is part of the extremist narrative of the Caliphate.

Of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs, only Abu Bakr died of natural causes. Umar, Uthman, and Ali were all assassinated, Uthman and Ali by fellow Muslims.¹⁸ This shows a significant discrepancy between the reality of the Caliphate and the glossy image projected by extremists. Whereas they paint a picture of an ideal institution and a time of unity for Muslims, in fact the period was one of internal strife, assassination, and civil war.

Uthman practiced nepotism, placing members of his family and tribe in key positions and giving them money from the treasury.¹⁹ Traditionally, land gained through conquest was divided among the warriors who conquered the land. Uthman changed this, keeping the land as "crown

Contrary to the extremist narrative of ideal government and unity, the early Caliphate was a time of strife, assassination, and civil war

property to be used at the discretion of the Vicegerent.”²⁰ More than any other Caliph, Uthman saw himself as a king.

Uthman’s corruption reached the point that other Companions called for “jihad against the Caliph.”²¹ Uthman’s support among the people dwindled and eventually an insurrection occurred. Uthman’s house came under siege. A mob eventually broke through, located Uthman, and killed him. This story of a corrupt Caliph murdered by rebelling Muslims is nowhere to be found in the extremist narrative.

Ali’s tenure as Caliph is one of the most controversial. He was opposed from the beginning. Muhammad’s wife Aisha and Uthman’s cousin Muawiyah wanted revenge for Uthman’s killers, but Ali angered them by refusing. Ali also had to deal with the corruption issues that existed under Uthman. This meant he had to dismiss many regional governors and officials Uthman had put in place. Muawiyah refused to submit to Ali and rebelled against his rule. Eventually Ali and Muawiyah agreed to arbitration to resolve their differences, but this angered some of Ali’s original supporters, later known as Kharijites. The Kharijites felt that Ali should not negotiate, and by doing so had betrayed his position as Caliph. A Kharijite eventually assassinated Ali by stabbing him with a poisoned sword.

Ali’s death ended the Rashidun Caliphate.²² Muawiyah took the title of Caliph and thus began the Umayyad Caliphate. This was also the catalyst for one of the biggest schisms in religious history. Those Muslims that acknowledged Muawiyah as the Caliph would be known as Sunni, and those who believed that Ali was the true Caliph and that his descendants should retain the title would become known as Shia. These divisions had existed since Muhammad’s death, but the murder of Ali and the rise of Muawiyah solidified the split among Muslims. Indeed sectarianism arising from this split is one of the prime driving forces behind IS.

Extremists have built a fantasy Caliphate that embodies all that was positive while ignoring problems and complications

Uthman’s tenure as Caliph was wrought with corruption and ultimately led to a rebellion. Ali reigned during a period of opposition and civil war. Both ended with murder and led to the fracturing of Islam. This is not the place for a complete history of the later Caliphates;²³ however, that too is a tale of continued conflict with breakaway Sultanates and Emirates, and simultaneous, competing Caliphates—undermining the idea that a Caliphate equals unity. The penultimate Ottoman Caliphate, though it became the nominal representative of the Muslims, suffered repeated and significant losses to the Russian Empire, proving that a Caliphate is no protection from invasion and domination either.

It is hard to read this history as anything to which contemporary Muslims should aspire. What Islamists are discussing when they refer to the

historical Caliphate simply did not exist. They have built a fantasy Caliphate, one that embodies all that was positive about the institution and ignores all of its problems and complications. This shining, glorious kingdom on a hill is meant to inspire Muslims everywhere:

Dear honest and faithful Muslim brothers, what we are inviting you to is good and is better to God than what they are inviting you to. We are inviting you to the dignity of this life and the happiness of the hereafter. We are inviting you to return to your splendid glory, wise Caliphate, and brilliant civilization and to live with your heads high under the greatest banner. On the other hand, they are inviting you to humility, degradation, surrender, and to follow every deceitful person who is dressed in a goat hide but who has the treacherous heart of a wolf.²⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe three themes of effective strategic communication should be useful for countering extremist messaging about the new Caliphate, and offer the following recommendations about how a counter-narrative could be developed.

De-Romanticize the Caliphate

Halverson, et al., note that romanticizing the past in the way described above is a common communication tactic of Islamist extremists. It involves “compressing time” by editing the narrative to remove inconvenient details. They propose that such communication can be countered by undoing the editing:

A possible communication strategy for dealing with this compression of time is to put back the dead branches that were pruned away. In other words, time can be uncompressed by surfacing “inconvenient details” from history that disrupt the interpretation of the present in terms of selective and favorable facts from the past.²⁵

Thus, our first recommendation is to promote knowledge of facts about the historical Caliphate as it actually existed. Extremists assert that the Caliphate was a unifying system of government for Muslims. Yet multiple Caliphates existed at one time, nullifying the idea of unification. It was also a time of uprisings, assassination, and turmoil. If a government is ideal, its citizens do not rise up against it and kill its leaders. Reminders of these facts would ideally come from prominent Muslim scholars and theologians. They might even come from extremists themselves: Many extremist statements are easily accessible online and statements from them that seem to contradict the idea of a Caliphate could be used against them in a campaign of this nature.

Deconstruct the Imagined Community

The Muslim population is significantly larger and more diverse than it was during the heyday of the Caliphate. As much as Islamists want to see Islam as the identity that binds people together (as opposed to ethnicity or nationality), there are realities that dispute this image. For example, Indonesian Muslims, Saudi Muslims and European Muslims have significant differences. The idea of a Caliphate is not strong among European Muslims, due in part to the fact that (other than in southern Spain) the historical Caliphates never reached Europe. Indonesian Muslims have significant disagreements with conservative Arab Muslims about allowable religious practices.²⁶ For a Caliphate to be successful, it would be necessary to find a way to bridge these differences. Emphasizing the differences undermines the notion that a new Caliphate is at hand.

Challenge Unified Diversity

In early IS texts that mention the Caliphate, Islamists never put forth a name of a contemporary figure that could legitimately hold the title of Caliph. The modern Caliph is treated as abstract, yet necessary for the establishment of a Caliphate. Part of the reason for this strategic ambiguity was that any name would immediately come under criticism, and this is exactly what happened with al-Baghdadi. Though IS appointed him as Caliph, his support comes only from those who work for him. No prominent Muslim, Islamist or otherwise, has acknowledged al-Baghdadi, nor has there been significant celebration or mass vocal support for this newly established Caliphate from the world's Muslim population.

On the contrary, in July, the International Union of Muslim Scholars—which supports the idea of a Caliphate in general—released a statement declaring that IS's claim is illegitimate because it was not based on sufficient consultation with people's representatives, scholars, officials, and Islamic groups.²⁷ In the weeks following IS's announcement, there was a flood of arguments from Sunni Muslim groups and scholars, detailing religious, sociocultural, and political arguments against recognizing the declaration.²⁸

CONCLUSION

The whole history of the Caliphate, and the origin of the Sunni/Shia schism, is one of disagreement about who should lead the Muslim community. The modern diversity of Muslims only makes issues of leadership even more contentious. There is no modern individual who all Islamists could look to and agree should be the leader of the global Muslim community. Various people are praised and credited for creating an environment in which a Caliphate could potentially exist, but no one

ever achieves consensus support as the next Caliph. The Shia historically believe that the Caliph should be a descendent of the Prophet; the Sunni believe it should be the best, most able individual. But in the modern, connected, globalized world, with nearly 1.6 billion Muslims, how does one determine which descendent or able individual is best qualified? Whether IS can maintain its Caliphate depends on multiple factors, but the strategic communication efforts proposed here can help undermine the Caliphate they have declared.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Withnall, Adam. (2014, June 30). [Iraq Crisis: Isis declares its territories a new Islamic State with 'restoration of Caliphate' in Middle East](#). *The Independent*.
- ² Opensource.gov (2011, June 3). Jihadist writer criticizes ousted Arab regimes, calls for Islamic ruling systems.
- ³ Halverson, J.R., Goodall, H.L. & Corman, S.R. (2011), *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, Chapter 1.
- ⁴ Opensource.gov (2009, April 5). AQLIM issues 'Message to Muslim Algerian People', rejecting forthcoming elections.
- ⁵ Halverson, et al., Chapter 14.
- ⁶ Opensource.gov (2009, February 17). Ansar al-Sunnah discusses Shiite's 'betrayal', calls for ending Shiism.
- ⁷ Opensource.gov (2012, April 2). JAMI commemorates 9th anniversary of US 'occupation' of Iraq.
- ⁸ Opensource.gov (2010, October 16). Al-Sahabah Army publishes political-cultural journal: 'Jihad of the Mujahidin.'
- ⁹ Opensource.gov (2012, April 25). Jihadist writer Abu-Asma al-Kubi predicts coming 'faith-based wars.'
- ¹⁰ Halverson, et al., p.137.
- ¹¹ Opensource.gov (2007, May 5). Zawahiri video interview on Iraq and other issues.
- ¹² See Halverson, et al., Chapter 5.
- ¹³ Opensource.gov (2010, July 29). Audio statement by AQAP commander 'On the Recent Events in Aden and Ma'rib.'
- ¹⁴ Anonymous (2012, April 23). "Islam and the 'interfaith movement.'" Ansar al-Mujahidin Network.
- ¹⁵ See Goodall, B., Trethewey, A., & McDonald, K. (2006). [Strategic ambiguity, communication, and public diplomacy in an uncertain world: Principles and practices](#). Report No. 0604, Center for Strategic Communication.
- ¹⁶ <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1808/news/4216> 8/21/2014
- ¹⁷ Opensource.gov (2005, December 11). Zawahiri says victory imminent Bin Laden Mullah Omar Leading Resistance.
- ¹⁸ Umar was killed by Pirouz Nahavandi also known as Abu Lu'lu'ah, a Persian Zoroastrian. Abu Lu'lu'ah felt the tax non-Muslims had to pay was unjust and brought this to Umar's attention. Umar disagreed and did not give Abu Lu'lu'ah relief from this tax. Abu'Lu'lu'ah killed Umar in response.
- ¹⁹ Wilferd Madelung. *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Pgs. 81-82.
- ²⁰ Madelung p. 82.
- ²¹ Madelung p. 113.
- ²² It should be mentioned that the extremists do not limit their references to the Rashidun Caliphate. There are a number of mentions of the Abbasid Caliphate as well. The Abbasid Caliphate lasted from 750 to 1258 making it the longest Caliphate. Given its length it is not surprising that it gets mentioned in the extremist texts. The Abbasids were

descendants of Muhammad's uncle Abbas and sought revenge for the murder of Ali. In addition during the Umayyad Caliphate there was a division between the Arabs, who ruled, and the non-Arab Muslims who were seen as second class citizens. This obviously led to some negative feelings among the citizenry. The Abbasids capitalized on this frustration and they led a rebellion in 747. Three years later the Umayyads were out of power in the Middle East. The Umayyads retained a smaller Caliphate in Spain, which existed until 1031. It should also be pointed out that the Fatimid Caliphate existed from the 10th to 12th centuries. So there was a point at which three separate Caliphates existed simultaneously. This certainly calls into question the notion of a single unifying Muslim leader to unite the global Muslim community. These are in essence kingdoms like any other, yet that is completely ignored by the modern Islamist extremists.

²³ For such a review see Lapidus, I.M. (2014). *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁴ Opensource.gov (2011, June 21) Jihadist writer Husam Abd-Al-Ra'uf links jihad and Arab uprisings.

²⁵ Halverson, et al., pp 200-201.

²⁶ See Rohmaniyah, I. & Woodward, M. (2012), [Wahhabi perspectives on pluralism and gender: A Saudi-Indonesian contrast](#). Report No. 1201, Center for Strategic Communication.

²⁷ Al-Qaradawi, Y. & Daghi, A.A. (2014, July 8). [IUMS confirms that Islamic Khilafah announced by Iraqi state organization lacks any standards of legitimacy and realistic, and warns of chaos in jurisprudence](#). Iumsonline.org.

²⁸ MEMRI (2014, August 14). [The growing Summi opposition to ISIS' declaration of the Islamic Caliphate](#). memri.org