

BOOK REVIEW

Mona Hassan - Longing for the Lost Caliphate: A Transregional History

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The institution of the Islamic caliphate, the temporal succession to the Prophet Muhammad, emerged upon the latter's death in 632, when his close companions assumed leadership of the entire Muslim community's affairs, not merely those of a faction, tribe, or region. The unexpected disappearance of the Abbasid and Ottoman caliphates in 1258 and 1924 respectively, intensified Muslim anguish, cultural trauma, grief and sorrow. The book under review explores the reactions of Muslims to the loss of the caliphate and tries to answer two essential questions: What did Muslims imagine was lost with the disappearance of the caliphate in the 13th and 20th centuries? And how did they attempt to recapture the loss and redefine the caliphate under changing circumstances?

The book comprises six chapters, excluding an epilogue. Chapter 1, "Visions of a Lost Caliphal Capital: Baghdad" (pp. 20-64), explores the fall of the cosmopolitan city of peace (*Dar al-Salam*), as Baghdad was known, following the Mongol conquest in 1258. Painful to all those who had witnessed Baghdad's grandeur, this dreadful calamity initially saw the Muslims, upon hearing that the Mongols were besieging the city, beseech "God for the caliphal capital's safe and victorious deliverance". When news reached them that Baghdad had fallen, "the Muslim grief and mournful sorrow intensified" (p. 33). After the Mongols successfully besieged Baghdad, they unleashed their swords on Baghdad's inhabitants for forty days. This horrific trauma witnessed immense death and bloodshed: "Men, women, the elderly, children, preachers, leaders and memorisers of Qur'an were all slaughtered" (p. 37). Some of the inhabitants barely escaped the horror with their lives and experienced a heart-wrenching separation from their families. Mongols "tied their horses at the city's mosque, reducing the noble house of worship to the status of common stables," while daily congregational prayers and Friday prayers were obstructed and

discontinued for months (p. 46). Hassan highlights the unfathomable and long-lasting anguish and “cultural trauma” which Muslims observed during this void in the caliphate. Their intense grief was expressed through poetry, along with references in historical chronicles, biographical dictionaries and eschatological treatises. “The world without a caliph was so unimaginable for many premodern Muslims that the destruction of Baghdad embodied the eminent end of time itself – an eschatological interpretation.” It was as if the Mongols were Gog and Magog and one of the signs of the hour (pp. 56-65).

Chapter 2, “Recapturing Lost Glory and Legitimacy” (pp. 66-97), investigates subsequent Mamluk rule. Prominent religious scholars like Izz al-Din ‘Abd al-Salam (1181-1262), known as *Sultan al-‘Ulama*, refused to pledge allegiance to the Mamluk rulers, intimating that their slave status disqualified them from serving as head of state (p. 67). The author highlights the intensely problematic question of political and legal legitimacy for premodern Muslim states in the wake of the Abbasid Caliphate’s demise, similar to the self-image of Byzantine as a second Rome. Hassan shows how legal scholars articulated creative jurisprudential solutions within Mamluk domains; Finally, the problem of caliphal non-existence was resolved by recruiting the political and spiritual institutions of Cairo, where the caliph delegated his authority to a sultan and radiated spiritual blessings through his physical presence. Hassan shows how Mamluk rulers promoted themselves by inaugurating the surviving family members of the Abbasids as caliphs (p. 72). Hassan argues that this fraught relationship between caliphs and a powerful nobility continued to surface as a magnet for political activity and debate, including the ever-potent threat of rebellion during Mamluk rule (p. 93).

Chapter 3, “Conceptualizing the Caliphate, 632-1517” (pp. 98-141), highlights the many philosophical discourses on the caliphate and the universal consensus amongst Muslim scholars concerning the obligation of appointing a caliph. The caliphate in Sunni Islam is a legal necessity and communal obligation (p. 99). Hassan shows that the caliphate enjoyed continued importance in Muslim political theory after the destruction of Baghdad. Political thinkers like al-Mawardi (d.1058), al-Juwayni (d. 1085), his disciple al-Ghazali (d. 1111), Ibn Jamaah (d. 1333), and Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) all discussed the necessity of the caliphate as a communal obligation (pp. 103-15). For instance, Ibn Taymiyyah acknowledged that “the word caliph is a common term for those entrusted with political authority among Muslims” (p. 113), while Shams al-Din al-Dahabi (d. 1348) argued that “Sunnis, Mu’tazilites, Murji’ities, Kharijities, and Shi‘is all agree upon the necessity (*wujub*) of the imamate and that it is obligatory (*fard*) upon the Muslim community to follow a just leader” (p. 116). Moreover, Taj al-Din al-Subki (d. 1370), Najm al-Din Tarsusi (d. 1396), and Ibn Khaldun (d.

1406), a great theoretician of history and the father of sociology, also discussed the caliphate (pp. 118-30). Dahabi's argument was furthered by Ibn Khaldun, who considered political rule to be a "social necessity for human beings, in order to organize their affairs, and recognize[d] it could take multiple forms" (p. 124). Furthermore, 'Ala' al-Din Ali b. Ahmad al-Shirazi (d. 1457) focused upon obedience to political authority, whereas Jalal al-Din Suyuti (d. 1505) claimed that the "caliphate will remain in the hands of the Abbasids until the second coming of Jesus (Messiah)" (p. 140).

Chapter 4, "Manifold Meanings of Loss: Ottoman Defeat, Early 1920," illustrates the polemical debates, all taking the form of poetry, that took place between one of the last Ottoman *sehyhulislam*, Mustafa Sabri (1869-1954), and the Egyptian poet prince, Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932). "Mustafa Sabri vigorously defended the Sunni traditionalist position of a caliphate's juridical and socio-cultural necessity" (p. 142), while Ahmad Shawqi was inspired by the Turkish war of independence and by "Mustafa Kamal as the new hero who strove to liberate Turkish lands from autocratic rule" (pp. 142-3). Hassan further emphasises the title "Manifold Meanings of Loss" by highlighting the voices of opposition within Turkey to the abolition of the caliphate, such as the independent deputy, Zeki Bey (d. 1952), who expressed his disagreement with the proposed motion to abolish the caliphate. Hassan demonstrates how Muslim divisions led to the decline of the Ottoman Caliphate – "the presence of rival candidates for the position of Caliph will put off, indefinitely, Muslim unity" (p. 183).

Chapter 5, "In International Pursuit of a Caliphate" (pp. 184-217), explores the vibrant discussions amongst twentieth-century scholars about the caliphate, overviewing their ideas on how to revive that institution in the post-war era. Some Muslim political thinkers focused on the traditional caliphal figure, while others proposed new models of internationalism embracing the nation state and international organisations. Conferences held by Azhari scholars in particular sought to resolve the dilemma of the caliphate, sparking a flurry of enthusiasm from figures like Mohammad Barakatullah (d. 1927) and Inayatullah Khan al-Mashriqi (d. 1888-1963). In short, they approached the caliphate from all possible angles, whether legal, historical, or political, to preserve the bonds of the Muslim community. Finally, the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate in the 1920s lead to the intriguing question of whether or not the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) could be considered as an alternative model for the caliphate in the modern era.

Chapter 6, "Debating a Modern Caliphate" (pp. 218-52), highlights six twentieth-century Muslim (traditionalist and modernist) political theories challenging the future of the caliphate. For instance, Ismail Sukru (d. 1905)

described the “Caliph as a leading political figure and his lack of power as a temporary situation” and the “caliphate shouldn’t be reduced to a mere spiritual institution” as that will result in its destruction (pp. 218-9). Another thinker, Mehmed Seyyid Celebizade (d. 1925), proposed that the “Caliphate is not really a religious matter or a question of faith,” but actually a “worldly and political issue” and belongs to the “branch of jurisprudence” (p. 221). Seyyid also sought to bolster the concept of “national sovereignty as the true locus of political power in Islam”, an argument furthered by ‘Ali Abd al-Raziq (d. 1966), who cast the “caliphate as an inherently absolutist institution” that “discounts the exegetical traditions,” “denies the prophetic traditions” and “negates the broad scholarly consensus” on political power (p. 226). He argued that if by caliphate and imamate Muslim jurists meant “the absolute or limited, monarchical or republican, despotic or constitutional, democratic or socialist” forms of government, then it was un-Islamic (p. 226). Seyyid and ‘Ali argued in favour of secular governance above and beyond the discursive tradition of Muslim jurists. Muhammad al-Khider Husayn (d. 1958), however, a critic of Raziq, argued that the latter “portrayed the caliphate as a dark and grotesque caricature of itself”, expediently distorting religious texts by using a dubious methodology and literary anecdotes, dropping key words from quotations, twisting other words beyond all linguistic recognition, and taking phrases out of context to convey an impression that contradicts both the original passage and its classical commentary. Husayn instead defined the caliphate as being like a “constitutional monarchy”, wherein the head of state should be just, brave, erudite, wise, experienced, and dependent upon the “indispensable principles of consultancy” (pp. 233-5). Mustafa Sabri (d. 1954), on the other hand, argued that the “separation of the caliphate from political power was actually intended to uproot Islamic law”. Epistemologically, “Kemalist machinations drawing inspiration from French revolutionary principles separating church and state” (pp. 237-8) undermined the caliphate. In Sabri’s estimation, an Islamic caliphate was necessarily composed of two components: “government (*hukumah*) and the faithful representation of the Prophet (*niyabah*)” (p. 238). He keenly focused on Islamic law in realistic terms, and continued to accommodate changing political structures by embracing identifiable Muslim nation states as potential, multiple caliphates. Said Nursi (d.1960) indulged Sufi paradigms in politics, arguing that the exploitation of religion for political reasons was a crime. His vision advocated a superior, spiritual caliphate that would inherit the Prophetic mission and teach people how to balance and perfect their characters (pp. 250-1).

The book’s epilogue, “The Swirl of Religious Hopes and Aspirations” (pp. 253-60), presents the birth and development of widely divergent Islamist

movements after the abolition of the caliphate in 1924, leaving the Muslim community bereft of its traditional sources of political and religious leadership. It uncovers differences regarding the sense of the caliphate, its meaning in changing contexts, and how premodern and modern scholars have reinterpreted it after two traumatic experiences of loss.

Hassan's groundbreaking study concerns Muslim intellectual history, with a main focus on Arab and Turkish Muslim thinkers. The book opens up new avenues of research concerning how South Asia and the rest of the Muslim World sees the former splendor of the caliphate while trying to recapture it.