Some Misconceptions about the Caliphate in Islam

Wayel Azmeh, The University of Dayton

In June 2014, the militia known as ISIS-Islamic State in Iraq and Syria announced the re-establishment of the caliphate. This is happening ninety years following the official end of the symbolic title of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924 CE. The caliphate has recently been described by ISIS spokesman as "the dream in all the Muslims’ hearts" and "the hope of all jihadists." This romantic symbol of the caliphate attracts young Muslims from all over the world via the Internet to this so-called Islamic state. Abu Mohamed al-Adnani, the spokesman for ISIS declared: "The legality of all emirates, groups, states and organisations becomes null by the expansion of the caliph’s authority and the arrival of its troops to their areas… Listen to your caliph (sovereign) and obey him. Support your state, which grows every day."

According to my observation, current day caliphate advocates build up a sacralized image of the caliphate based on three claims:

1. That there has been only one caliph at a time governing all Muslims, continuously uninterrupted until the caliphate system was abolished at the hands of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish republic in Turkey in 1924 CE.

2. That all previous caliphs provided abundant wealth to all their citizens thanks to vast territories they governed with exemplary justice. The abolition of the institution of the caliphate resulted in the weakness and oppression of Muslims today. Therefore, ISIS claims to be restoring lost power and justice to Muslims all around the world by bringing the caliphate back to life.

3. That Islam has a specific divine blueprint for a system of governance called the caliphate system, mandated by God. Anyone who abandons this blueprint abandons Islam.

In this essay, I will explore and question the historic basis underpinning the three above misconceptions. I will also survey the founding texts of Islam, the Qur’an and hadith (narration of Prophetic sayings) to challenge the idea that the caliphate is mandated by the religion of Islam.

The war against the terror inflicted by ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Boko Haram has to be won on all fronts. In the age of globalism, knowing the facts goes beyond saving some potential recruits from making very bad choices. Setting the record straight can reverse
unintended indirect support for the terrorist propaganda machine by some journalists and media personas. Repeating those misconceptions as if they were facts only lends free support to the colossal terrorist propaganda machine. The war on terror is the responsibility of all citizens of the world. It should embody a war on ignorance and misinformation by the masses, Muslims and others in order for it to have a lasting impact.