

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE ABOLITION OF THE CALIPHATE: HOW COMPLEX CAN RELIGION AND POLITICS GET?

On March 3, 1924 the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) promulgated Law #431 which declared the Caliph deposed and the dignity abolished. The Caliphate didn't have too many mourners as the legitimacy and acceptability of the Ottoman rulers' claim to the Caliphate had already been questioned. No matter how contested the title and how few the mourners though, the TGNA's decision precipitated a serious debate in the Muslim world the effects of which are still being felt via the discourse of religious fundamentalist groups.

Despite all its centrality, the topic failed to get enough attention from social scientists. Even though there are a lot of works written on the Caliphate, they focus on the early-Caliphate or the late-Ottoman Caliphate separately and apart from a few detailed accounts they talk about the abolition of the caliphate only in passing. This paper will attempt to account for this gap by providing a historical portrayal of the Caliphate from the time of Muhammad to modern Turkey as well as by looking at the impact of the abolition on the discourses of today's radical Islamist groups. Although it had been abolished in 1924 restoring the Caliphate is still the ultimate aim of some radical Islamist groups (i.e. Al-Qaeda, Hizb al-Tahrir) and if we are to understand the complexity of the current problems it is necessary that we look for their traces in the past.

To that aim, I will make use of a content analysis of the speeches of Al-Qaeda and Hizb al-Tahrir leaders and a historical analysis of the discussions in the Muslim world concerning the abolition of the Caliphate which I hope will also help us shed light on some time-immemorial problems in Islam concerning politics and religion. Moreover, I will situate this study in the discussion of secularism and argue that most secularism theories treat the matter very simplistically while in reality secularism is a very complex process as displayed by the fact that over time even a 'secular' reform such as the abolition of the Caliphate has served the needs of religious groups and helped them mobilize people for their cause. Hence, taking the abolition of the Caliphate as its case study the paper will try to contribute to the broader literature of secularism and religious politics in the Middle East and highlight the idea that these topics deserve a more nuanced approach than that of the current literature.