

Support for the Caliphate and Radical Mobilization

Project Title: Communication and Radical Mobilization

Working Group: Terrorist Group Formation

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Overview

The desire for the return of the Caliph, a religious and political leader for Muslims worldwide, is an often-mentioned goal in radical Islamic discourse, yet is rarely discussed in the counter-terrorism literature. As part of an ongoing project examining extremist Islamist groups in Indonesia, our research has examined the role of the Caliph ideology in radical mobilization.

Background

On August 12, 2007, Indonesia's branch of Hizbut Tahrir (HT-I) hosted the 3rd International Caliphate Conference in the Jakarta. In contrast to the 5,000 attendees of the first such conference in May 2000, the 2007 conference drew over 90,000 participants from at least 39 different countries. Groups in attendance ranged from moderate Islamic organizations to those associated with Al Qaeda. Conference attendees were bound by the desire to reestablish the Caliph as a religious and political leader of a global Islamic state (a Caliphate).

The Caliph dates back to the Prophet Muhammad in the early 7th Century. During the Ottoman Empire, the Caliphate was moved to Turkey where it resided for over three hundred years. In 1924, the Islamic Turkish government, seeking to become a more secular country, banned the Caliphate after having chain of over one thousand Caliphs. Reestablishing the Caliph has been a salient cause among some Islamic circles ever since.

Current radical Islamist movements seek to facilitate re-establishing the Caliphate, deposing the Saudi government, and returning the Caliph to the land of the Prophet Muhammad. These radical movements trace their roots to reform movements such as Salafism and Wahabism and the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, all of which sought, among other things, to reestablish the Caliphate (Mitchell, 1969; Stanley, 2005). When these pious movements failed to achieve this goal, insurgent movements, most notably Al Qaeda, developed strategies to overcome the obstacles that had thwarted the reestablishment of the Caliph—obstacles such as the U.S. government, its allies, and moderate Islamic governments such as Indonesia, Turkey, and Egypt (Gerges, 2005). Islamist websites describe the shame felt by the Islamic community resulting from the loss of the Caliph and the hegemony of western entities. Social psychologists note that such shame is an intense motivator for extremist organizations (Sageman, 2004; Selengut, 2003).

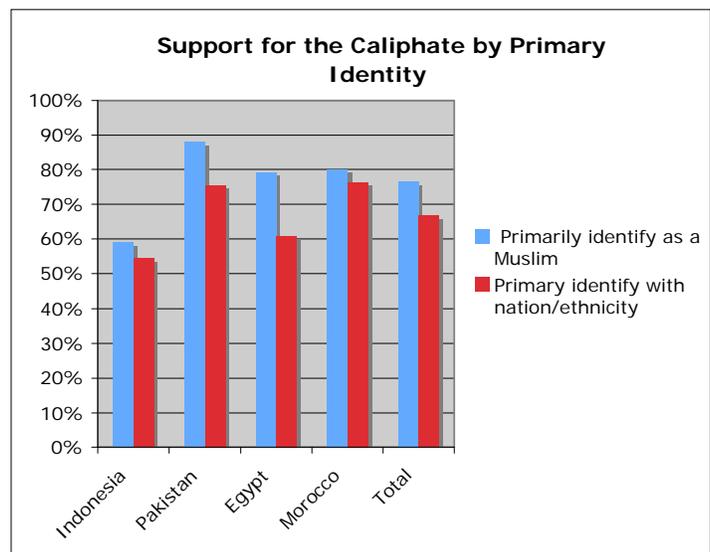
Current difficulties in re-establishing the Caliphate. When Muhammad died in 632, he did not leave clear instructions for the succession of his leadership (Arnold, 1965). Subsequent discussion among the early followers of Islam sought to determine whether the succession of leadership (Caliph) should follow the Arabian model of bloodline or, rather, the leader should be chosen solely based on his ability to maintain the religious and philosophical tenets of the movement. The first four Caliphs were chosen by the Muslim leadership according to the latter criteria, but the selection of subsequent Caliphs deviated from this practice, which has been blamed as the primary reason for Islam's failure to achieve the religious and political domination envisioned by Muhammad (Tahrir, 2003; Taji-Farouki, 1996). Currently, there is no consensus among Muslims regarding the Caliph selection process.

Our Research

We use multiple data sources to investigate the power of the Caliph ideology. First, we conducted in-depth interviews with leaders and cadre of the radical Islamic group Hizbut Tahrir in Indonesia during the weeks leading up to the 2007 caliphate conference in Jakarta. Second, we analyzed data from the 2007 START survey conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) in four Islamic majority countries.

Hizbut Tahrir-Indonesia. Based on organizational publications and our interviews with HT-I's leader, Ismail Yusanto, we know that his organization favors a "staged process" for re-establishing the Caliphate. By taking political control over a government in a non-violent *coup d'état*, they would then hold Islamic elections in that country to choose a Caliph who would lead that country in overthrowing neighboring Muslim countries. Competing Islamic groups such as Muslim Brotherhood are unwilling to embrace HT's approach to re-establishing the Caliph, an example of the interorganizational struggle over the Caliph selection process, which will lead to long-term instability among radical Islamic organizations.

Do average Muslims dream of the Caliphate rule? Analyzing data from four Islamic countries gathered by PIPA in 2007, the answer is yes. Survey respondents indicated whether their primary identification was religious or nationalistic, and whether they support an Islamic world unified under a Caliph. Support among Muslim and national identifiers is substantial (77% and 67% respectively). While differences between identifier groups was significant for Pakistan and Egypt—with Muslim identifiers significantly more likely to support a Caliphate--no differences were found between religious and nationalists in Indonesia and Morocco. These findings demonstrate that the longing for the return of the caliph transcends ideological orientations and reflects what scholars posit as a "collective identity" issue (Castells, 1997).



Conclusion

Our research demonstrates that the Caliph imagery is a strong motivator within Muslim discourse. Pious zealots are often swept into the political expression of Jihad while attending small study groups (Hairgrove & McLeod, forthcoming 2008). For some Muslims, the imagery of an Islam reflective of the golden era of Muhammad is a religious value worthy of pursuit in terms of life goals, finances, and personal sacrifice “in the cause of Allah.” This ideological war for the “hearts and minds” for Muslims is considered a war for a “collective identity” and has no shortage of patriots willing to join the struggle.

Internal struggles within the Islamic community over reestablishing the Caliphate will be ongoing, with spillovers into the geo-political landscape such as 9-11, the “war on terror,” Iraq, and the elections in Islamic majority countries such as Turkey, Indonesia, and Egypt. This issue will continue to over-shadow other geo-political issues until world bodies assist the Islamic world in addressing the Caliphate issue, turning the discourse inward, instead of outward in jihad against western interests.

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