Is the Caliphate An Extremist Islamic Goal?

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The word 'extreme' only takes on meaning when defined against some benchmark. 'Extreme' weather is a serious departure from a normal, expected climate; extremely hot or cold water is defined as such when compared against, say, lukewarm. The word is relative and defined in relation to some 'norm'. Ideas are not different.

So to the question - is the Caliphate an extreme 'Islamic' goal - Islam is the benchmark against which the Caliphate's normality is measured. Is the Caliphate a serious departure from Islam, an outlier belief that represents an extreme from the norm of Islamic orthodoxy?

There is of course an altogether different question posed by the west in which 'extreme' is measured not in relation to Islam, but to the west, or liberal secular democracy. That's where on the rare occasion it is accompanied with some definition. In most cases, 'extreme' is not qualified and used simply to brand Islamic ideas as beyond the pale.

To the first question, whether the Caliphate is extreme when compared with Islam, this can be answered from a doctrinal, legal and historical perspective.

Historically, the Caliphate dominates some 94% of Islamic history. It formally came to an end in 1924 CE; the first Caliph was elected some 1300 hundred years prior in 632 CE. Despite its strengths and weaknesses, peaks and troughs, the historical norm was for Muslims to live with a Caliphate. So deeply established was it historically, some academics believe the current weakness of Muslim nation states is a consequence of the deep roots and trans-national nature of the Caliphate and ummah that now challenge post-colonial borders. On the occasion of its termination, confusion reigned, prayers suspended, people grappled to assume its title from Egypt to the Sharif of Mecca, and movements formed almost immediately to secure its restoration. If the Caliphate represented an extreme, what explains its dominance in Islamic history and the deep sense of loss and impact that accompanied its collapse?

Legally, the Caliphate represents the executive authority charged with the implementation of the Shariah. Jurists throughout Islamic history, from as early as Shaybani's Siyar (a treatise on international relations), Abu Yusuf's Kitab al Kharaj through Mawardi's ahkam al Sultaniyah to the multitudes

through the centuries, have written extensively on the role, rights and remit of the Caliphate. The institution of the Caliphate is foundational to Islamic law. Whilst much is made of 'hudud' punishments by the west, the fact these can only be administered by a state is often totally missed. Islamic Law has always recognised Islam's temporal jurisdiction: classically its scope comprises ibadat - personal worships - and mu'amalat - temporal law. The Shariah therefore that not only addresses morality, rituals, person and family, but comprises a vast body of law relating to state and society. Furthermore, rather than an outlier, classical Islamic law considers the Caliphate an 'obligation' on Muslims to ensure it exists. The classical jurist Abu Hanifa, founder of the school of law followed by 70% of Sunni Muslims, described the Caliphate as the 'mother' of all Islamic obligations. This may explain ongoing demands for its restoration - these being not just a function of its 'appeal' but because it represents a core Islamic requirement.

Doctrinally, Islamic belief considers the notion of God's sovereignty an essential aspect of Tawhid, the belief in one God. Whilst the agent of human reasoning attempts to understand the law and apply it, the origin of law is divine and the sole legitimate reference in the resolution of disputes and law. Islamic law rests upon this premise and explains its character and scope.

Unfortunately for the west, these are not the arguments of 'islamists'. Each can be verified independently against the classical, orthodox books of law and theology. Whilst some may de-prioritise the Caliphate, consider it too difficult to form immediately, or choose to defer its establishment, these are a function of practical considerations not a challenge to the requirement of governing according to Islam under a Caliphate. Those who have attempted to challenge this requirement directly have found themselves ostracized from classical Islamic learning, whether by the Ulema or the people at large. Examples of such attempts are therefore not many, but Ali Abdul Razzaq's represent one of the more recent and public (although that was a century ago). Even modernisers have avoided challenging this core requirement, choosing instead to re-define or re-interpret its form.

Dr Noah Feldman in his book "The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State" in the chapter "What Went Right?' describes how many in the Muslim world consider the Islamic State: "if one notices that for thirteen hundred years, Islam provided the dominant language of politics in the middle east...then the re-emergence of Islam looks like the return to the norm."

As for the question posed by the west, that needs to be addressed separately. But suffice to say here, just as the west describe the Caliphate extreme in relation to western values, many Muslims describe western moral, social and economic values and decay extreme when compared to Islamic values. Clearly the approach is relative, and concludes no more than the obvious fact that Islam and secular liberal democracy are different. It's time we move beyond the labels and assess the substance of each set of claims.