Longing for the Lost Caliphate: A Transregional History

Mona Hassan
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In her superbly learned book, Mona Hassan sets out to explain the enduring meaning of Muslim lamentations after two of the greatest Muslim ca-

liphates were abolished in 1258 and 1924 CE. 1258 marks the date when the last Abbasid Caliph, al-Musta'sim, knelt before the Mongol Commander Hulegu outside the walls of Baghdad, shortly before he was executed. Hassan is not here directly concerned with the history of either the Abbasid Caliphate or the Mongol conquest; rather, she seeks to understand what was a novel problem for the Muslim community, namely, the absence of a caliph, which then lasted three and a half years. She grew interested in this topic as she read the poetic exclamations of Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, composed almost two hundred years later. She uses the long history of learned reflection upon and mourning for the passing of the Abbasid Caliphate as a device to understand the ramifications of the more recent abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924. By demonstrating that the violent end of the Abbasid Caliphate reverberated for hundreds of years, Hassan argues that the Muslim community is still experiencing the aftermath of the fateful events of March 3, 1924.

Hassan's study preoccupies itself primarily with two interrelated questions. The first question is what Muslims imagined to be lost with the disappearance of the Abbasid and Ottoman Caliphates in 1258 and 1924, respectively. The second question is how they attempted to recapture that perceived loss, and in doing so redefined the caliphate for their times, under shifting circumstances (2). By focusing on the sense of "symbolic loss" among Muslims of Afro-Eurasia, Hassan is able to perceive trans-regional Muslim intellectual and social networks in both the pre-modern and modern periods. In particular, Hassan beautifully captures the repeated reproduction of the elegiac form and its tropes in the aftermath of each caliphate, and she seeks to understand what this repetition can tell us. Hassan also goes on to argue that collective memorialization of catastrophe is not unique to the Muslim community but finds parallels in the ways in which other religious communities narrate defining moments of loss, such as the destruction of the Second Temple, the fall of Rome and later Constantinople, or what she describes as the contemporary "renegotiation of transregional religious identities and institutions amid the modern world system of nation-states, such as the re-articulation of the papacy and the global rise of politicized religious movements and parties" (15-16).

Hassan ends her study with contrasting epigraphs by the founder of the Society of Muslim Brothers, Hasan al-Banna, and by the prolific Kurdish scholar, Said Nursi. Al-Banna is heard saying in 1938 that "the caliphate is the symbol of Islamic unity" and that his organization would "place the idea of caliphate and working to restore it at the head of their programs"

(*Risālat al-Mu'tamar al-Khamīs*, 57-58). Al-Banna openly acknowledged that the shock of the loss of the Ottoman Caliphate was one of the principal reasons for his desire to found the Society of Muslim Brothers, which Hassan refers to as "the grandfather of contemporary Islamists movements around the globe" (253). By contrast, in 1928 Said Nursi is quoted as reflecting on the end of the Caliphate, saying, "I seek refuge in God from Satan and Politics!" Hassan makes this juxtaposition in order to point out that while the Caliphate and its loss becomes a symbolic resource employed by a diversity of Muslims and Islamic groups, there has been no single response to this loss, despite the frequent evocations of 1258 and 1924.

At its heart Hassan's work is both explanatory and argumentative. She seeks to help us understand how it is possible to mobilize the memory of an institution like the caliphate that at first glance appears completely anachronistic to the political world as it is structured today. Hassan asks what work is done by the memory of the Caliphate for those who evoke it. At another level it offers a sharp corrective to the casual dismissal of the Caliphate by an earlier generation of scholars such Bernard Lewis and Patricia Crone. Focusing on the decline of the Caliphate as an institution of earthly political power, Lewis held that "the Mongols did little more than lay the ghost of an institution that was already dead" (*The Arabs in History* [Oxford, 1993], 168); Crone wrote that "the sources are not exactly brimming over with grief" (*God's Rule: Government and Islam* [Columbia, 2005], 250). For Hassan it is particularly their narrow vision of "the sources" that blind Lewis and Crone to the richness and depth of sorrow and longing that fills the Muslim community. As she demonstrates in her first chapter (which is perhaps the most likely to be taught to advanced undergraduates), all one has to do to get a sense of the grief that fills the Muslim community is to look at the music, poetry, and historical chronicles produced over the hundreds of years since the murder of the last Abbasid Caliph in 1258 to understand the lamentation.

The book is divided into six substantive chapters. Three deal broadly with the meaning of the loss of Abbasid Caliphate in the thirteenth century, and three deal with the end and repercussions of the Ottoman Caliphate in the twentieth century. After a conceptual introduction, Chapter 1 discusses the longing for Baghdad in sources of multiple languages ranging from Spain in the West to Yemen in the South and to Persia and India in the East. Chapter Two is a fascinating discussion of the legal basis for the reconstitution of the Caliphate in Mamluk Egypt and the tangled relationship between the Islamic concepts of Sultanate and Caliphate. Chapter

Three furthers this discussion by asking why Mamluk rulers believed it was necessary to maintain a Caliphate. This chapter foreshadows the rupture that was felt among learned Muslims in 1924 when Kemal al-Din Ataturk not only dismissed the Ottoman Caliph but unexpectedly cast aside the institution of the Caliphate itself, as discussed in Chapter 4. Here Hassan argues that this rupture opened up a multitude of spaces for the concept of the Caliphate to be rethought and contested. Chapter Five argues that it was this very opening, without the possibility of immediate closure, that made it so difficult for Muslim communities to reconstitute a Caliphate in the twentieth century. The unlimited possibilities for the form of the reimagined Caliphate made it difficult to choose one solution over others. Chapter Six gives us a sense of what was at stake in scholarly debate and the sense of violence that stalked early twentieth century discussions of the Caliphate. These were not purely academic musings but were discussions that the participants felt would determine the political, religious, social and cultural future of their societies. The epilogue explores the notion that feelings of symbolic loss continue to resonate today and to shape our political possibilities.

This is an excellent and learned book. The argument is novel and refreshing. At times its comprehensiveness makes it likely that some of the chapters will be skimmed and referred to later as references rather than read cover to cover.

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