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Introduction

What was the nature of the early caliphate? Islamicists generally believe it to have been a purely political institution. According to Nallino, no caliph ever enjoyed religious authority;¹ according to other Islamicists, some caliphs did lay claim to such authority, but only by way of secondary development and only with limited success². In what follows we shall challenge this belief. It is of course true that religious authority was the prerogative of scholars rather than of caliphs in classical Islam, but we shall argue that this is not how things began. The early caliphate was conceived along lines very different from the classical institution, all religious and political authority being concentrated in it; it was the caliph who was charged with the definition of Islamic law, the very core of the religion, and without allegiance to a caliph no Muslim could achieve salvation. In short, we shall argue that the early caliphate was conceived along the lines familiar from Shi‘ite Islam.

The conventional Islamicist view of the caliphate is that enshrined in the bulk of our sources. Practically all the literature informs us that though the Prophet was God’s representative on earth in both political and religious matters, there ceased to be a single representative in religious matters on the Prophet’s death. Political power passed to the new head of state, the caliph; but religious authority remained with the Prophet himself or, differently put, it passed to

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those men who remembered what he had said. These men, the Companions, transmitted their recollection of his words and deeds to the next generation, who passed it on to the next, and so forth, and whoever learnt what the Prophet had said and done acquired religious authority thereby. In short, while political power continued to be concentrated in one man, religious authority was now dispersed among those people who, owing their authority entirely to their learning, came to be known as simply the ‘ulamā’, the scholars. As it happened, however, the first three caliphs (Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthmān) were themselves Companions, so that in practice religious and political authority continued to be united, if no longer concentrated, in the head of state, and during this period the caliphs could and did issue authoritative rulings on law. But though the fourth caliph (ʿAlī) was also a Companion and moreover a kinsman of the Prophet, he failed to be generally accepted, and on his death the caliphate passed to men who had converted late and unwillingly (the ʿUmayyads), so that the happy union of religion and politics now came to an end. Caliphs and ‘ulamā’ went their separate ways, to be briefly reunited only under the pious ʿUmar II.

Most Shiʿītes disagree with this view. According to the Imāmīs and related-sects, the legitimate head of state (ʿAlī) inherited not only the political, but also the religious authority of the Prophet. In practice, of course, the legitimate head of state after ʿAlī was deprived of his political power by his Sunnī rivals, so that he could only function as a purely religious leader of his Shiʿīte following; but in principle he was both head of state and ultimate authority on questions of law and doctrine in Islam.

Modern Islamicists however generally regard the Shiʿītes as deviant. Some take them to have started off as adherents of a political leader who was not, at first, very different from that of their opponents, but who was gradually transformed into a religious figurehead. Others believe them to have elevated their leader into a religious figurehead from the start, but to have done so under the influence of foreign ideas, their model being the supposedly charismatic leadership of pre-Islamic south Arabia. Either way, it is the Shiʿītes, not the Sunnīs, who are seen as having diverged from the common pattern.

It certainly makes sense to assume that Sunnīs and Shiʿītes started

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4 Thus W. M. Watt, Islam and the Integration of Society, London 1961, pp. 105f.; repeated by Watt in numerous other publications; accepted by Nagel, Rechtsleistung, pp. 45f.
with a common conception of the caliphal office; and given that we owe practically all our sources to those who were in due course to become the Sunnī majority, it is not surprising that we automatically assume this conception to have been of the Sunnī rather than the Shī‘īte type. There is, however, much evidence to suggest that this is a mistake.
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The title *khalīfat Allāh*

We take as our starting point the well known fact that the Umayyads made use of the title *khalīfat Allāh*,¹ an expression which we along with many others understand to mean ‘deputy of God’.

This translation is scarcely in need of much defence. A *khalīfa* is somebody who stands in the place of another, that is a deputy or a successor depending on whether the other is absent or dead; since the Muslims assumed God to be alive, *khalīfat Allāh* cannot mean ‘God’s successor’. However, in order to accommodate the conventional view that the caliphate is succession to Muhammad rather than deputyship on behalf of God, Goldziher construed it as meaning ‘successor (of the prophet approved) by God’,² and this interpretation has found favour with some. It might now be defended with reference to Paret’s conclusion that Qur’ānically *khalīfa* means successor.³ Two Qur’ānic verses were customarily invoked by those who called themselves *khalīfat Allāh*, that is 2:28, in which God announces that ‘I am placing a *khalīfa* on earth’ with reference to Adam, and 38:25,

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in which He tells David that ‘we have made you a khalîfâ on earth’;4 if Paret is right that khalîfâ invariably means successor in the Qur’ân, and if the title khalîfât Allâh was actually coined with reference to these verses, then the title ought indeed to mean ‘God’s successor’ in the sense of ‘successor appointed by Him’ as Goldziher suggested. But plainly it did not. Leaving aside the fact that there were exegetes who disagreed with Paret6 and that the provenance of the title is unknown, the texts leave no doubt that khalîfât Allâh as applied to the head of state was understood to mean ‘deputy of God’. As Watt notes, there are passages in both poetry and prose which militate against Goldziher’s interpretation;5 paraphrastic titles such as amîn Allâh, ‘trustee of God’, râ‘î Allâh, ‘shepherd of God’, sulûk Allâh, ‘the authority of God’ or nâ‘îb Allâh, ‘lieutenant of God’ also make it unlikely that khalîfât Allâh meant anything but ‘deputy of God’;5 and so does the general tenor of the sources, as will be seen. Moreover, since ‘Uthmân, the first caliph for whom the title khalîfât Allâh is securely attested, was also known as amîn Allâh, there is no reason to assume that khalîfât Allâh only acquired its exalted meaning in the course of its evolution;6 we may take it that it meant ‘deputy of God’ from the start.

Now ‘deputy of God’ is a title which implies a strong claim to religious authority. This is why we are interested in it, and we wish to begin by establishing three basic points. First, it is attested not

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4 If khalîfâ means successor here, Adam was a successor to angels or jinn and David to some previous king.
5 Cf. Watt, ‘God’s Caliph’, p. 566, where some exegetical views are cited. Al-Baydawi also accepts that khalîfâ means deputy, adding that every prophet was a deputy of God (Anwâr al-tanzil wa-arâr al-ta’wil, Istanbul n.d., vol. 1, p. 64, ad 2:28), and the same interpretation is implied in the stories in which ‘Umar I and ‘Umar II reject the title of khalîfât Allâh on the ground that it refers exclusively to prophets such as David (cf. below, note 86). According to Watt, the exegetes exercised great ingenuity to avoid the interpretation of khalîfâ as ‘deputy’ for political reasons, opting for far-fetched interpretations such as that of ‘posterity’ or ‘successor’ instead (W. M. Watt, The Formative Period of Islamic Thought, Edinburgh 1973, p. 84); the far-fetched interpretation is that adopted by Paret). But what bothered an exegete such as al-Tabari was clearly not politics, but rather the incompatibility of 2:28 with the doctrine of prophetic imâma: how could a deputy of God, viz. a prophet, be said to ‘act corruptly and shed blood’? (cf. id., ‘God’s Caliph’, p. 566).
6 Watt, ‘God’s Caliph’, p. 571; id., Formative Period, p. 84. In what follows we shall translate khalîfât Allâh as ‘deputy of God’ or leave the expression untranslated; the reader may judge for himself how many times ‘successor of the Prophet approved by God’ would be a felicitous rendition.
7 Cf. the index.
8 Cf. Watt, Formative Period, p. 84, where this possibility is left open. For ‘Uthmân as amîn Allâh see below, note 85.
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just for some Umayyad caliphs, but for all of them, or more precisely for all of those who lived to rule for more than a year; secondly, it was an official designation of the Umayyad head of state, not just a term of flattery; and thirdly, it was well known to be what the title of khalīfa stood for when used on its own.

1 Attestations per caliph

Note: In order not to clutter the text we give only short references here; full bibliographical details are given in the list of works cited. We should like to acknowledge our debt to Tyan, whose Califat provided us with many of our attestations.

(1) ‘Uthmān

(a) ‘I am the servant of God and His deputy’ (Aḥānī, vol. xvi, p. 326; Ṭqā, vol. iv, p. 301b).
(b) ‘I beseech you by God and remind you of His right and the right of His khalīfa’ (Aḥānī, vol. xvi, p. 325).
(c) ‘Perhaps you will see the khalīfa of God among you as he was, one day in a place of joy’ (Ḥassān b. Thābit, no. 20:10; cf. ‘Arafat, ‘Background’, pp. 276ff.).
(d) ‘The deputy of God, he gave them and granted them what there was of gold, vessels and silver’ (Laylā al-Akhyaliyya, no. 27:2).
(e) ‘They were brought something which cancels the duty to avenge a deputy of God’s (khalīfatn il’llāh, Naṣr b. Muzāḥim, Waqat Sīfīn, p. 229).

(2) Muʿāwiya

(a) ‘The earth belongs to God and I am the deputy of God’ (Bal., Anz., vol. iv/a, p. 17 = vol. iv/1, p. 20, §63; Mas., Murji, vol. iii, §1861 = v, p. 104f).
(b) ‘Your brother, Ibn Ḥarb, is the deputy of God and you are his vizier’ (Ḥarthāb b. Badr to Ziyād b. Abīhī in Tab., ser. ii, p. 78).
(c) ‘You have lost the khalīfat Allāh and been given the khilīfat Allāh’ (‘Āṭā’ or ‘Āṣim b. Abī Shayfī to Yazīd I on Muʿāwiya’s death in Jāḥiz, Bayān, vol. ii, p. 191; Mas., Murji, vol. iii, §1912 = v, p. 152; Ṭqā, vol. iii, p. 3091b).
(d) ‘Muʿāwiya b. Abī Sufyān was a servant whom God deputed
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(istakhlaqahu Allāh) over the servants...and God...has now invested us with what he had’ (Yazīd I in Ibn Qutayba, Imāma, p. 190).


(3) Yazīd I

(a) Cf. above, 2, c,d,e.
(b) ‘Imām al-mustamīn wa-khalīfāt rabb al-‘ālamīn (Muslim b. ‘Uqba in Ibn Qutayba, Imāma, p. 203, cf. p. 202: ‘I hope that God, exalted and mighty is He, will inspire His khāliṣa and ‘abd with knowledge of what should be done’).
(c) ‘Woe to you who have separated from the sunna and jamā‘a and who have disobeyed the deputy of God’ (Syrians to Hāshimites in Ḥamza al-Isḥāḥānī, p. 217).

(5) The Sufyānids in general

(a) ‘O people of Jordan, you know that Ibn al-Zubayr is in a state of disension, hypocrisy and disobedience against the caliphs of God’ (Ḥassān b. Mālik b. Baḥdal in ‘Iqd, vol. iv, p. 395*).
(b) The Umayyads in the presence of Mu‘āwiya are addressed as banī khulafā’ Allāh (Aghānī, vol. xx, p. 212; al-Tīhānī, ‘Miskīn al-Dārīmī’, p. 185).

(5) Marwān I

No direct attestation.

(6) ‘Abd al-Malik

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(b) For the stories in which al-Hajjāj deems God’s khalīfah superior to His rasūl with reference to ‘ Abd al-Malik, see below, chapter 3, pp. 28f.

(c) ‘To the servant of God, the Commander of the Faithful and khālidīr rabb al-‘αlāmin’ (letter from al-Hajjāj to ‘ Abd al-Malik in ‘ Iqd, vol. v, p. 2512).

(d) ‘God, exalted is He, has said, “fear God as much as you can” (64:16). This is [due] to God. . . Then He said, “hear and obey” (also 64:16). This [obedience is due] to the servant of God, the khalīfah of God and the noble one/beloved (najīb/ ḥabīb) of God, ‘ Abd al-Malik’ (speech by al-Hajjāj in Mas., ṫurūj, vol. iii, §2088 = v, p. 330; ‘ Iqd, vol. iv, p. 117; cf. Abū Dāwūd, Sunan, vol. ii, p. 514, and the mangled version in Ibn ‘Asākir, Tādhīb, vol. iv, p. 72, in which the caliphal epithets are reduced to amīr al-mu’minīn).


(f) ‘God, mighty and exalted is He, has deputed the Commander of the Faithful ‘ Abd al-Malik over His lands (istakhlasahu Allāh) and been satisfied with him as imam over His servants’ (speech by al-Hajjāj in Ibn Qutayba, ‘Imāma, p. 233).

(g) ‘The earth belongs to God who has appointed His khalīfah to it’ (Farazdaq, vol. i, p. 25a).

(h) ‘Ibn Marwān is on your hump, the khalīfah of God who has mounted you’ (camel-driver’s song in Aghānī, vol. xvi, p. 183; a variant version refers to al-Walīd I, cf. below).

(i) ‘God has garlanded you with khalīfah and huda’ (Jarīr, p. 474a).


(l) ‘The deputy of God on his minbar’ (Ibn Qays al-Ruqayyāt, no. 1:17 (p. 70)).

(m) Khalīfah al-Rāmhān (Rā’i, pp. 2284, 2294, variants; the text has wali amr Allāh).

(7) al-Walīd I

(a) For the stories in which Khālid al-Qasrī deems God’s khalīfah superior to His rasūl with reference to al-Walīd I, see below, chapter 3, p. 29.
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(b) *Fa-anta li-rabb al-ʿālamīn khalīfa* (Jarīr, p. 384*).  

(c) ‘You are the shepherd of God on earth’ (Faraazdaq, vol. i, p. 312*).

(d) ‘The caliph of God through whom clouds of rain are sought’ (Nābighat B. Shaybān, p. 28*).

(e) ‘The *khalīfa* of God through whose *sunnā* rain is sought’ (Akhtal, p. 185*).

(f) ‘The *khalīfa* of God who has mounted you’ (Al-Walīd to his camel in *‘Iqād*, vol. iv, p. 424, a variant of 6 (h); cf. Ibn ‘Asīkir, *Tahdīb*, vol. iii, p. 398, where it is Jamīl who says it of al-Walīd I).

(8) Sulaymān

(a) ‘The *khalīfa* of God through whom rain is sought’ (Faraazdaq, vol. i, p. 361*). Note also Jarīr, p. 35*, where Ayyūb, the son of Sulaymān is prematurely described as *khalīfa li’l-Rahmān*.

(b) ‘My heir apparent among you and my successor among all of those over whom God has deputed me (*staḥkhfūfī Allāh*) is...’Umar’ (Sulaymān’s testament in Ibn Qutayba, *Imāma*, p. 308; in this document Sulaymān styles himself *khalifat al-muslimīn*, cf. p. 307*).

(9) ‘Umar II

(a) ‘The *khalīfa* of God, and God will preserve him’ (Jarīr, p. 274*; the title is mentioned again at p. 275*).

(b) ‘The one who sent the Prophet has placed the *khilāfa* in the just imam’ (Jarīr, p. 415*).

(10) Yazīd II

(a) ‘Yazīd b. ‘Abd al-Malik is the deputy of God; God had deputed him over His servants... and he was appointed to what you see’ (Ibn Hubayra in Mas., *Murūj*, vol. iv, §2210 = v, p. 458; Ibn Khalilīkān, vol. ii, p. 71).

(b) *Khalifat Allāh* (Jarīr, p. 256*).

(11) Hishām

(a) For stories in which the deputy and the messenger of God are compared with reference to Hishām, see below, chapter 3, p. 29.
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(b) ‘and Hishām, the deputy of God’ (al-‘Abalī in Aghānī, vol. xi, p. 305).

c) ‘You are using abusive words for all that you are God’s deputy on earth’ (visitor to Hishām in Ibn Kathīr, Bidāya, vol. ix, p. 1351).

(d) ‘You have lied to khalfat al-Rahmān concerning it’ (al-Farazdaq or al-Mufarrigh b. al-Muraqqa’in Aghānī, vol. xxii, p. 21).


(f) Note also khalfat al-ard, khalfat al-anām (Farazdaq, vol. i, p. 165, vol. ii, p. 830); compare Sulaymān’s khalfat al-muslimīn (above, 8, b).

12) al-Walīd II

(a) Cf. the letter translated below, appendix 2, pp. 116ff., in which the caliphal institution is identified as deputyship on behalf of God and the caliphs are referred to as khulafā’ Allāh.

13) Yazīd III

(a) Cf. the letter translated below, appendix 2, pp. 126ff., in which Yazīd III identifies all Umayyad caliphs up to and including Hishām as khulafā’ Allāh; by implication he brackets himself with them.

14) Marwān II

(a) Cf. the letter in which Marwān (not yet caliph) states that ‘this caliphate is from God’ (Tab., ser. ii, p. 1850).


(c) ‘And in disobedience to the deputy of God a Muslim continually strikes with the sword in his hand that of his brother’ (‘Abd al-Ḥamīd b. Yahyā with reference, probably, to Marwān II, in his Risāla fi’l-fitna’ in al-Tadhkhīra al-ḥamdānīyya, bāb 31). Cf. below, chapter 3, note 14, where ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd speaks of God’s rasūl and khilīfa.