



The significance of the killing of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Initial assessment)

October 28, 2019

Overview

The killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi by an elite American force **is a serious blow to ISIS. A charismatic, authoritarian leader, he was the dominant figure in the ISIS leadership.** His uniqueness was his unsuccessful attempt, the first of its kind, to establish an Islamic Caliphate, here and now, which would restore to Islam the glory of its beginnings. Moreover, **al-Baghdadi had the final word regarding military, religious and governmental issues, and the ISIS leadership was completely dependent on him.** In ITIC assessment, following his killing **ISIS can be expected to weaken but not collapse, because it still has strategic assets which enable it to continue operating in Syria, Iraq and around the globe** (see below). ISIS may find it difficult to continue operating as a global hierarchal organization and its existing tendency to decentralize may increase.



The last picture taken of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, appearing in a video issued after the blow suffered by ISIS in the Euphrates Valley in Syria (Akhbar al-Muslimin, April 29, 2019).

The Killing of al-Baghdadi (Overview updated to October 28, 2019).

► On October 27, 2019, the American president announced that an elite American force had carried out a night raid in which ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed. Several operatives were killed with him, apparently senior ISIS operatives whose names will be made

public in the coming days. Some of his family members were also killed. The American media reported that the raid included air strikes and air landings of special forces from helicopters. According to reports, al-Baghdadi blew himself up in a tunnel using an explosive belt after he realized the American forces were closing in on him. **So far ISIS has not formally responded to al-Baghdadi's killing.**



The bodies of women and children killed in the American operation (Abaa' October 27, 2019).

► Donald Trump announced to the media that American special forces had reached the location in eight helicopters which flew from Iraqi airspace to Syrian airspace controlled by Russia. Turkey, he said, had been aware of the operation. American special forces went to the building where al-Baghdadi was hiding. He ran to a tunnel with three of his young children while pursued by attack dogs. He panicked, according to the president, and blew himself up with an explosive belt. "He died like a dog," said Trump, "he died like a coward." According to Trump, genetic tests performed on site **proved conclusively that it was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**. When the operation ended **sensitive ISIS materials were taken, including documents**. No American soldier was harmed in the raid.



Trump announce the killing of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Trump's Twitter account, October 27, 2019).

Location of the raid

► The raid took place in **the village of Barisha**, about 15.5 miles **north of Idlib**, about **three miles from the Syria-Turkey border**. The region is **controlled by the Headquarters for the Liberation of al-Sham**, as well as by **Ansar al-Tahrir and the Defenders of the Faith**, the **two latter organizations affiliated with al-Qaeda** (al-Mayadeen, October 27, 2019). The fact that al-Baghdadi was in the region at all is particularly strange because the entire area is controlled **by organizations hostile to ISIS**. In ITIC assessment, it was a serious violation of the caution al-Baghdadi employed for years.



**Barisha, the village where Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed
(Google Maps)**



Right: The ruins of the structure where Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was staying. Left: A vehicle destroyed at the scene of the attack (Khutwa, October 27, 2019).

The Significance of the Killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

► In ITIC assessment, although ISIS did in fact suffer a serious blow with al-Baghdadi's killing, **it will continue to exist and operate in Syria, Iraq and around the world as a global terrorist organization. ISIS's continuing existence and activities are made possible thanks to four important strategic assets still in ISIS's possession:**

◆ **Asset number 1: The organization's Salafist-jihadi ideology.** Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is dead, but **the Salafist-jihadi ideology is alive and kicking in the Middle East and in the Muslim communities around the globe.** The ideology will continue to attract young Muslims not only in Iraq and Syria, but in other countries in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, and **also in Western countries.**

◆ **Asset number 2: The existence of a broad military infrastructure in both of ISIS's core countries, Syria and Iraq.** The regimes in Syria and Iraq find it difficult to uproot the infrastructure because they have a low level of governance, there are rifts between various sects and communities (especially between Shi'ites and Sunnis) and they are exposed to power struggles between regional and global powers. The weakness of the Kurdish military force (SDF) caused by Turkey's invasion of Syria is liable to increase ISIS's freedom of action in eastern and northern Syria. In addition, the Iraqi regime has chronic difficulties in functioning, which will make it easy for ISIS to regain its strength in western and northern Iraq, regions with Sunni populations.



ISIS notice stressing the importance of its media campaign. It reads, "Oh media worker, you are indeed a jihad fighter. The media campaign is not less important than the campaign on the battlefield. Therefore each of you must remain alert for every opportunity to renew the intention [to operate for the sake of ISIS's Islamic State]" archive.org, April 6, 2016).

In ITIC assessment, these four strategic assets **will enable ISIS to continue operating as a global terrorist organization**, regardless of the setbacks of the past two years (the loss of the Islamic State, the conquest of its strongholds in the Euphrates Valley and the killing of its leader). **After al-Baghdadi's heir establishes himself**, ISIS may rehabilitate itself and become strong once again, as it did in 2010 after the death of its leaders in Iraq.

The question of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's succession

- ▶ In ITIC assessment, to prevent a leadership vacuum ISIS will have to act quickly to choose a new leader to inherit Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. However, on the other hand, in the absence of a dominant, authoritarian figure who is obviously considered al-Baghdadi's natural successor, **power struggles may ensue within the ISIS's ranks between prominent operatives**, which can prolong the process.
- ▶ Following al-Baghdadi's death there were news items about several candidates who might replace him. One of the names mentioned was **Muhammad Sayid Abd al-Rahman Mula** (aka **Haji Abdallah** or **Abdallah Qardash**). He is an Iraqi of Turkman origin who was close to al-Baghdadi. He was an officer in Iraqi military intelligence during the regime of Saddam Hussein and later a senior religious figure in al-Qaeda. Like al-Baghdadi, **he was imprisoned in Iraq by the American army** because of his links to al-Qaeda. **Haji Abdallah and al-Baghdadi were imprisoned together in the Camp Bucca Detention Center** in Basra.



**Haji Abdallah while he was in prison
(Wikipedia)**

Retribution attacks

- ▶ The killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is liable to lead to **attempts to carry out retribution attacks in the various arenas where ISIS operates**. They may be carried out by ISIS operatives and supporters around the globe (ISIS-inspired attacks). The objective of the attacks may be to send the message that **ISIS is alive and well and continues to operate despite the blow it suffered with the death of its leader**.
- ▶ Targets with high priority are liable to be those **affiliated with the West**, whether in the Western countries themselves or targets identified with them around the globe (like the series of suicide bombing attacks in Sri Lanka). **The upcoming Christmas season** may be given priority for such terrorist retribution attacks.

Appendix

Portrait of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

► **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi** was an alias for ISIS's charismatic leader **Ibrahim bin-Awad al-Badri al-Husseini al-Qurashi al-Baghdadi**. Abu Bakr was the name of the Caliph who came after Muhammad and was the first of the Four Caliphs who established the first Islamic Caliphate (considered Islam's golden age).

► Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's family belonged to the Sunni Arab al-Bu Badri tribe. It is a large Iraqi tribe predominantly based the Samarra region.¹ Al-Baghdadi was also called al-Qurashi, that is, of the Quraish tribe, the tribe of the prophet Muhammad. **That was meant to indicate the family's attribution to the prophet Muhammad.** The family has many religious figures, as befits the descendants of the prophet (a genuine or in all probability false attribution).



Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivers a sermon in the Great Mosque in Mosul (YouTube, July 5, 2014)

► **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was apparently born in Samarra, Iraq, in 1971.** He is thought to have studied in the department of Islamic studies at the Islamic University in Baghdad,² where he received a BA, an MA and a PhD in Islamic studies. Before the fall of Saddam Hussein, al-Baghdadi was a devout young man who often visited the mosque (Liberation.fr, June 12, 2012). According to information from the Iraqi administration, he taught Islamic

¹ The al-Bu Badri tribe is divided into many branches living in Baghdad, southern Iraq and Diyala. Its south Iraqi branches adopted Shi'ite Islam. Those living in the Samarra region are Sunni and were harassed by the Jaish al-Mahdi Shi'ite militias headed by Muqtada al-Sadr. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was from the al-Sada branch, with households in Samarra, Baghdad, Amara and Baqubah. The members of that branch are considered the descendants of Mohammed and have a high religious status.

² It is also possible that he studied at the Saddam Hussein Islamic University.

studies at the university (apparently the University of Baghdad). He was also an imam at a mosque in Samarra and later in Fallujah (al-arabiya.net)

► After the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 al-Baghdadi joined forces with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who established the **al-Qaeda branch in Iraq** in 2004, out of which ISIS grew (Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed in an American air strike in June 2006). At the time, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi headed a small jihadist organization called Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin, one of the organizations that fought against the American forces in Iraq. **In 2006 al-Baghdadi joined the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI)**, the jihadist framework that preceded ISIS and operated only in Iraq. After establishing the new organization, he became a member of its leadership and was responsible for its religious affairs. **After both ISI's leaders were killed** (April 2010)³, **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became its leader.**

► Despite the fact that al-Baghdadi's field of expertise was religion, **he acquired considerable military experience fighting against the American forces in Iraq. In October 2011 the American state department designated him as a terrorist and offered a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading to his capture.** The reward was raised to up to \$25 million in 2016 in view of the increase in his importance after he declared himself Caliph of the Islamic State and after the spread of ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

³ In April 2010 the Iraqi security forces in cooperation with the Americas killed Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, the two prominent figures in ISI. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi inherited their positions.

STOP AL-BAGHDADI

UP TO \$25 MILLION REWARD



ABU BAKR AL-BAGHDADI
(ABU DU'A)
(IBRAHIM 'AWWAD
IBRAHIM 'ALI AL-BADRI)
Up to \$25 Million Reward

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, also known as Abu Du'a, also known as Ibrahim 'Awwad Ibrahim 'Ali al-Badri, is the senior leader of the terrorist organization Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Under al-Baghdadi, ISIL has been responsible for the deaths of thousands of civilians.

The U.S. Government is offering a reward of up to \$25 million for information about al-Baghdadi. Absolute confidentiality is assured and relocation may be available. If you have information, please contact the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate or no2daesh@rewards4justice.co.

REWARDS FOR JUSTICE



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20533-0303 USA
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WANTED

Information that brings to justice...



Abu Du'a
Up to \$10 Million Reward

Abu Du'a is the senior leader of the terrorist organization, al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI). Abu Du'a is in charge of overseeing all AQI operations and is currently based in Syria. AQI was listed by the UN 1267 Committee in 2004 under permanent reference number QE.J.115.04. Abu Du'a is responsible for managing and directing AQI large scale operations, such as the AQI August 28, 2011 attack on the Umm al-Qura mosque in Baghdad which killed prominent Sunni lawmaker Khalid al-Fahdawi.

In a statement eulogizing Osama bin Ladin, Abu Du'a threatened violent retaliation for bin Ladin's death. Three days after bin Ladin's death, Abu Du'a claimed responsibility for an attack in Hillia, Iraq, that killed 24 policemen and wounded 72 others. On August 15, 2011, a wave of AQI suicide attacks began in Mosul, Iraq, which culminated in over 70 deaths. Shortly thereafter, Abu Du'a pledged on AQI's website to carry out 100 attacks across Iraq in retaliation for bin Ladin's death.

Place of Birth: Samarra, Iraq
Date of Birth: 1971
Sex: Male
Hair: Black
Eyes: Brown

Submit a Tip
www.rewardsforjustice.net
1-800-US-REWARD
(1-800-877-3927)
RFJ@state.gov

Right: Wanted noted from the American department of state offering a reward for information about Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Rewards for Justice, October 2011). Left: Wanted poster issued by the American department of state offering a reward of up to \$25 million for information about Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Rewards for Justice, December 16, 2016).

► **In 2004 al-Baghdadi was arrested by American forces in Fallujah.** He was held in the Camp Bucca Detention Center on suspicion of supporting al-Qaeda. **In 2009 he was handed over to the Iraqi administration, which decided to release him.** A short time later, **in May 2010, he was raised to the position of leader of the Islamic State in Iraq,** replacing Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, who was killed by the Americans in April 2010. In April 2013, with the unification of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Jabhat al-Nusra (the Syrian branch of ISI), **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the leader of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).** In **February 2014 he was expelled from al-Qaeda led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, following a rift with Jabhat al-Nusra.**



Pictures from al-Baghdadi's imprisonment, 2009-2010, distributed by the Iraqi administration.

On June 29, 2014, in the Great Mosque in Mosul, Iraq, al-Baghdadi declared himself the Caliph of the Islamic State. In 2014 ISIS was at the height of its power: it controlled the key cities of Mosul, Tikrit and al-Raqqa, controlled a large civilian population, enjoyed extensive economic resources (mainly Iraq and Syria's oil reserves) and won prestige and support throughout the Muslim world. However, in the wake of the ongoing American campaign against it, **towards the end of 2015 ISIS began weakening in Iraq and Syria, a process that has continued to this day.**

► During the past two years there have been occasional reports of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's death or wounding, in most cases without reliable proof. On one occasion (November 9, 2014) the Iraqi media reported that **he had been wounded in an American air strike in the city of al-Qa'im**, in western Iraq near the Syrian border. It was reported that other senior ISIS figures had also been killed or wounded. Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, an ISIS spokesman at the time, admitted that al-Baghdadi had been wounded and asked for prayers to be offered for his speedy recovery. The wound was apparently not serious because after he recovered he continued leading ISIS on without particular difficulties.



Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, November 9, 2014: "Do you think the Caliphate will end with the martyrdom of the Caliph? Let us calm the [Muslim] nation with the news that its Emir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, feels well, thanks to Allah. Pray for his speedy recovery" (Twitter).

► Despite the serious blows inflicted on ISIS in Iraq and Syria in recent years, **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has continued as leader without question, and as far as is known without significant opposition to his leadership inside the organization. Under al-Baghdadi ISIS adapted itself to the new circumstances created with the fall of the Islamic State, changed its modus operandi and became a terrorist-guerrilla organization without**

territorial borders and without directing the daily lives of the population. In the meantime ISIS **extended its influence around the globe** by recognizing local jihadist organizations in Asia and Africa as ISIS provinces fighting the local governments or rival jihadist organizations (especially al-Qaeda).

► Even after the collapse of ISIS's last territorial strongholds in the Euphrates Valley (March 2019), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi successfully preserved ISIS's media empire, which has continued functioning under his direction. Through its media outlets ISIS continued inculcating its jihadist ideology among supporters around the globe and motivated some of them to carry out attacks which were inspired by but not directly orchestrated by ISIS. The organization's media outlets enabled it **to continue raising a certain amount of money and recruit supporters** around the globe who preserved the ISIS brand and continued spreading its Salafist-jihadi ideology, which has proved itself to have a great power of attraction.⁴

► **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi rarely appeared in public or made public statements.** When he did they were intended mainly to disprove rumors of his death and to sharpen ISIS's messages to its operatives and supporters, especially after blows suffered by ISIS. On April 29, 2019, ISIS issued a video in which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appeared and which referenced current events (see the picture on the first page). **It was his first video appearance since June 2014**, when he declared the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate, and the last in which he appeared. While in 2014 ISIS was at the height of its power, the recent video was made after the blow the organization was dealt in al-Baghuz in the Euphrates Valley (March 2019).⁵

► In ITIC assessment the last video was issued with several objectives: **to disprove the rumors of his death; to encourage Islamic State operatives to continue on the path of jihad** to avenge the deaths of the operatives killed in al-Baghuz; **to send the message that ISIS had not been defeated and was not about to disappear**; to emphasize the activities of ISIS's provinces around to world as an alternative to the blows dealt to the organizations in Syria and Iraq' and **to enlist support for the organization** from the entire Muslim world. As opposed to the 2014 video, in which al-Baghdadi was well-dressed, well-groomed and with a neatly-trimmed beard, calm and arrogant, **in the April 2019 video he seemed exhausted**

⁴ For further information, see the February 10, 2019 bulletin, "ISIS's media network: Developments in 2018 and future courses of action."

⁵ Between the two videos al-Baghdadi issued a number of audio recordings disseminated by the social networks and websites affiliated with ISIS.

and had neglected his appearance: his beard was untrimmed, part white and part faded, and he was dressed sloppily in clothing more suited to ISIS operatives than to its leader. He spoke relatively slowly and was less enthusiastic and energetic than in the past. **In ITIC assessment his appearance was a function of the difficulties ISIS had to deal with and which influenced his personal behavior (since he was forced to hide and constantly move from place to place).**

► On September 16, 2019, a few weeks before he was killed, ISIS's information network issued an audio recording of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sounding **much more self-confident**. In ITIC assessment that was because ISIS had succeeded in restoring some of its activity in Syria and Iraq and even **expanding its activity to Africa and Afghanistan**. Al-Baghdadi stressed that **ISIS was becoming stronger** around the world. He called on ISIS operatives and supporters to **increase their military activities and to participate in the battle for hearts and minds through the media**. The emphasis on media activities indicated the great importance it had for al-Baghdadi, as a means to raise morale and to recruit supporters and operatives. Also important was his **call to use force to liberate ISIS operatives and their wives from prisons and internment camps**. Those messages, the last he delivered in public, may be interpreted as a kind of "last will " left for his supporters in Syria, Iraq and the rest of the world.



Picture from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's last audio message
(Telegram, September 16, 2019).