



After Baghdadi?

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Executive Summary

- * Unlike previous reports of Baghdadi's demise - the current reports seem more reliable given the dynamics within the leadership ranks of the Islamic State/Caliphate. In several places, the Islamic State/Caliphate issued a brief statement announcing that Baghdadi is dead and the name of the "new Caliph."
- * Baghdadi was target-killed by the Russian Air Force in late May in Raqqa.
- * Ultimately, the question of whether Baghdadi is indeed dead or not is not the crux issue. The leadership of the Islamic State/Caliphate has endured frequent target-killings and learned to cope with such losses. They established leadership councils and a host of redundancies in senior ranks - all aimed to guarantee continuity even as target-killings continue and escalate.
- * The vast majority of the key commanders currently rising in the Islamic State/Caliphate are veterans of Saddam Hussein's Intelligence and Armed Forces.
- * Even if a new Caliph is nominated - he will not be the actual leader. The real leaders are the two-man team of Iyad al-Obaidi and Ayad al-Jumaili - both veterans of Saddam's military. Obaidi has already moved to assume leadership from his bastion in Hawija, Iraq, where he controls the main forces of the Islamic State/Caliphate.
- * Obaidi's ascent is contested. Clashes already broke out among rival factions. If permitted to spread, these infighting over Baghdadi's empty seat will do more harm to the Islamic State/Caliphate than all the efforts of both the US- and Russia-led coalitions

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Analysis

Around 25 May 2017, Russian Intelligence learned about a forthcoming meeting of most senior leaders and commanders of the Islamic State/Caliphate in the Raqqa area. The reports mentioned the anticipated participation of “the great leader” (al-Zaim al-Kabir), but not of the Caliph. Subsequent reports identified the specific building where the meeting would take place - a farm house just south of Raqqa - and the precise time - right after midnight. On the night of 27/28 May, a Russian UAV confirmed that the meeting was indeed taking place as reported. There was unusual and exceptionally heavy security all around the building.

As prepared in advance, the Russian Air Force launched a heavy bombing raid of the entire area by Su-34 and Su-35 fighter-bombers. They bombed numerous IS targets all over the Raqqa area. However, two of the participating Su-34s launched several smart bombs at the specific building - flattening it. As captured by the UAV - it was impossible to survive the number of bombs directed at the building and the successive explosions.

Indeed, on the next day there were intense, if not hysterical, communications between Raqqa and major command centers of the Caliphate in eastern Syria and western Iraq. Reports and rumors continued to circulate throughout the ranks of the Islamic State/Caliphate over the next few days. As well, several names of senior commanders dropped from communications - suggesting incapacitation or death.

On 11 June, in its morning newscast, Syrian State TV reported that “Ibrahim Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was allegedly killed by an air strike in Raqqa City.” No details were provided and the claim was not repeated in subsequent newscasts.

Then, on 16 June, the Russian Ministry of Defense claimed to have target-killed Baghdadi in that bombing raid. “On May 28, after drones were used to confirm the information on the place and time of the meeting of IS leaders, between 00:35 and 00:45, Russian air forces launched a strike on the command point where the leaders were located,” the statement read. “According to the information which is now being checked via various channels, also present at the meeting was ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was eliminated as a result of the strike.” The Ministry of Defense estimated that several other senior leaders, about 30 field commanders and up to 300 bodyguards were killed in the bombing. On 22 June, the Kremlin claimed that new intelligence reports affirmed that it was “highly likely” that Baghdadi was indeed killed in the bombing raid.

By the end of June, Iranian Intelligence claimed to have independently confirmed Baghdadi’s death. “Terrorist Baghdadi is definitely dead,” Ali Shirazi, Khamenei’s representative to the Quds Forces, told Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) seniors on 29 June. He would not elaborate or provide additional details. On 2 July, Lieutenant Commander of the IRGC for General Operations, Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, commented on the Russian claims in a meeting with IRGC senior officers. “Apparently, the Russians say that he has been killed but we should wait a little. Also on the other side, the evidence and behavior of the ISIL members show that he has been killed and recently, anywhere his name is uttered it comes with weeping and mourning (among the terrorists),” he explained.

Meanwhile, Iranian Intelligence accumulated numerous reports from Jihadist provinces of the Islamic State, including internal documents, that alluded to the death of Baghdadi in late-May. In late-June, Iranian Intelligence reported that their sources in Nineveh province had reported that the Islamic State authorities “distributed thousands of leaflets and made public announcements through loudspeakers in the town of Tal-Afar that it will soon release very important statement about its chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri).



On 1 July, Iranian Intelligence reported, also from Tal-Afar in Nineveh province, that Abu Qatibeh, a very close aide and friend to al-Baghdadi, had “indirectly confirmed the death” of Baghdadi. During the Friday Prayers and Sermon (on 30 June) Abu Qatibeh “cried and made repeated mistakes” out of visible anguish. “Abu Qatibeh started suddenly crying while talking about Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,” the Iranian source reported. A couple of days later, another Iranian source reported the vicious reaction by the Caliphate security authorities. “Abu Qatibeh, who was a close friend to al-Baghdadi, implicitly endorsed earlier revelations about the death of ISIL’s ring leader and cried for him in his Friday Prayers sermon, which raised several questions. ISIL kept mum on the issue at first, but later arrested him and executed him on charges of sedition,” the second source reported. Abu Qatibeh was executed by public burning in front of his mosque. Caliphate officials vowed to punish by either whipping or burning anybody daring to talk about Baghdadi’s death. In early July, Caliphate security agents detained one of Baghdadi’s wives in Al-Shirqat, northern Salahuddin province, when she began displaying signs of mourning.

However, Iraqi Intelligence initially claimed to have doubts about Baghdadi’s killing. In early July, they believed Baghdadi was still alive and hiding in the countryside of al-Raqqa. According to their reports, he left Mosul for Syria on 11 March 2017 in order to personally lead the battle against the US-backed Kurdish forces. Baghdadi was expected to soon make his way to the new bastion of the Islamic State/Caliphate between the cities Bukamal (in Syria), Hawija and al-Qaim (in Iraq) where the main Jihadist forces are concentrated.

However, on 11 July, Iraqi Intelligence reported that the Islamic State/Caliphate announced the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and pledged that they would shortly announce his new successor. Most explicit was a communique distributed in the Islamic State’s “Diyala State” that confirmed the prevailing news about the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The statement urged all mujahedin to “persevere in their strongholds”, not to be influenced by “the sedition” claiming internal strife within the leadership, and to reject all threats to the “sustainability of Jihad for the Caliphate”. Iranian and Russian Intelligence also confirmed comparable communiqués being distributed in Nineveh province. Islamic State mujahedin were given a brief statement announcing that Baghdadi is dead and the name of the “new Caliph.”

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Ultimately, the question of whether Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is indeed dead or not is not the crux issue. The leadership of the Islamic State/Caliphate has endured the frequent target-killings by the US, Russia and other intelligence services - and learned to cope with such losses. As battlefield setbacks mounted and the number of casualties among senior commanders increased, Baghdadi and his inner-circle prepared the Islamic State/Caliphate for the worst. Recently, the reverberations of the spreading rumors about the death of Baghdadi and so many seniors and commanders resulted in the surfacing of the arrangements made by the Islamic State/Caliphate for the post-Baghdadi era.

The leadership has concrete plans for the continuation, even escalation, of the worldwide Jihad in what they call “the era of perseverance and patience”. The key to the view of the future of the Islamic State/Caliphate is “baqiya” (remaining or perseverance) despite ongoing setbacks and losses. Arab tradition is that “Allah is with the ‘sabirin’ (the patient ones)” who have the patience and perseverance to endure deprivation and suffering, and still be ready for sacrifice and martyrdom in order to bring about Allah’s inevitable triumph.

In his last recorded speech in May 2016, spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani hailed the triumphant and enduring struggle of the Islamic State/Caliphate despite ongoing setbacks. “Defeat,” Adnani declared, “is the



loss of the will and desire to fight. You will be victorious, America, and the mujahedin will be defeated only if you can remove the Quran from the hearts of the mujahedin.” Adnani himself was target killed on 30 August 2016 in the Aleppo area. The same theological attitude remains valid even as the forces of the Caliphate are being defeated and rumors of Baghdadi’s death are spreading. “Thanks to Allah who made us soldiers of the Caliphate. We fight under the flag ‘No god but Allah’. Russia, America and the infidel countries will not succeed in defeating our Faith and our Sharia. Even if they take the land from us, they will not succeed in tearing the Faith from our hearts. We will return ... to this Muslim land to impose Allah’s Sharia upon it,” wrote in early July 2017 Hamza al-Dagestani, a mujahed from Russia’s South Caucasus.

Baghdadi has never been an absolute leader of the Islamic State/Caliphate. All the nomination of senior commanders and other functionaries was actually the responsibility of an eight-member Shurah council that served as the Caliph’s advisory body. All members are veterans of the Jihad in Syria-Iraq. In early summer 2017, six Shurah members were Iraqis, one was Jordanian and one was Saudi Arabian. A ninth member, a Bahraini, was target-killed in late May 2017, and not replaced. Because of the campaign of target-killing, the Shurah members stopped meeting in person. Instead, they communicate via couriers.

Meanwhile, there surfaced a new 12-member leadership council under the name of “negotiating committee” and a host of redundancies in senior ranks - all aimed to guarantee continuity even as target-killings continue and escalate. This negotiating committee emerged at the same time that the role of al-Baghdadi has been limited due to the imperative of his hiding and thus being out of contact on a timely basis. The 12-member negotiating committee plans and manages virtually everything in the Islamic State/Caliphate - at least in the Euphrates Valley where they presently are. “Lately, Baghdadi has only been DI’ISH’s image, while the actual leadership of the organization in Syria and Iraq is in the hands of a 12-member council that plans and orders everything related to the group,” explained Ahmad al-Ramadan from Deir ez-Zor. It is not clear whether the 12-member negotiating committee replaces or overlaps the eight-member Shurah.

Although the focus of high-level activities is in the Euphrates Valley, the vast majority of the key commanders currently rising in the Islamic State/Caliphate are veterans of Saddam Hussein’s Intelligence and Armed Forces. They assume leadership positions even though their piety and religiosity leave a lot to be desired. Their prominence, however, will be important for allaying the Sunni Arab tribes of al-Jazira (eastern Syria and western Iraq) who already suffer from Iraq’s predominantly Shiite Armed Forces and Popular Mobilization Forces and their Iranian patrons and allies.

Even if a new Caliph is nominated in the aftermath of Baghdadi’s target-killing - he will not be the senior leader of the Islamic State/Caliphate. The real leaders are the two-man team of Iyad al-Obaidi and Ayad al-Jumaili. Iyad al-Obaidi, 54, is the war minister of the Islamic State. Ayad al-Jumaili, late-40’s, is the head of the Caliphate’s Amniya security and intelligence agency. The two are very close allies since their days under Saddam Hussein. Since Jumaili recognizes Obaidi as his senior - Obaidi is the most likely to succeed Baghdadi in practical terms. Since both have secular Baathist background and lack religious standing - neither Obaidi nor Jumaili are likely to become Caliph. Moreover, since Obaidi comes from a tribal background that is not descendent of the Prophet or even the Quraysh tribe - he cannot be declared Caliph. He can be nominated “the leader” (Zaim) of the Islamic State/Caliphate. Whether Obaidi will get a formal title or not is in the hands of the council. In all likelihood, if a new Caliph is declared - he will be a Saudi-affiliated religious authority.



Iyad al-Obaidi (aka Abu Saleh al-Obaidi or Saleh Haifa) comes from a prominent family of the powerful Obaidi tribe. He was raised and educated in Baghdad. He graduated from the Iraqi Military Academy around 1986 and immediately volunteered for the front where he saw extensive combat service against the Iranians. He returned to Baghdad in 1989 as a highly decorated officer and was ordered to join the Baath Party as the key to rapid advance in ranks.

Obaidi went underground after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. He joined the then-Baathist underground and led many raids against US forces in western Iraq. He was arrested as a former Baathist, rather than rebel commander, and jailed at Camp Bucca. There, he met and bonded with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi who convinced Obaidi to join the Jihad. That Obaidi is related to Baghdadi's wife, Saja al-Duleimi, helped a lot. After his release, Obaidi joined the Sunni Jihad under Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi. In 2010, Obaidi became Baghdadi's special aide. In this capacity, he not only helped organize and build what would become the forces of the Caliphate, but also reached out to old tribal and military contacts in order recruit former officers to join the Caliphate, fundraise "for the resistance" among the Sunni "old money" elite in Iraq and in exile, as well as obtain brand new assault rifles, machine guns, RPG-7s, and surface-to-air missiles from hidden storage sites of Saddam's Iraqi Army.

In the near future, the greatest asset of Iyad al-Obaidi will be his prominence among the Duleimi and the Obaidi tribes. The historic home of the Obaidis is Najd - the heart of the Arabian Peninsula. Iraq's Obaidis emigrated back in the 18th Century, but their nomadic branches continue to wander all the way to the Riyadh area. The Obaidi tribe has influential and powerful branches in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Kuwait. These tribal relations will be crucial to the declared plans of the Islamic State/Caliphate to spread the Jihad and liberate Islam's Holy Shrines in Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem.

Once Iyad al-Obaidi becomes the leader of the Islamic State/Caliphate, he will have a formidable force under his command - a force that was hardly affected by the recent fighting. These forces are not involved in the fighting in the Mosul area or the Euphrates Valley. There are about 5,000 elite Jihadists in Hawija, Kirkuk province, who provide regional security. The Islamic State also has three "armies" between Iraq and Syria - Jaish al-Khilafat, Jaish al-Uusra and Jaish al-Dabiq. Each army has around 12,000 fighters - that is, a 36,000-man force. The Islamic State also evacuated from Mosul the three "brigades" of foreign fighters before the last assault, so they were fairly intact. These brigades are the Liwat al-Nahawand (comprised mostly of Central Asian and Uighur mujahedin experts in tunnel fighting and ambushes), the Liwat Tariq Ibn Ziyad (comprised mostly of French-speaking European citizens who conducted suicidal raids and martyrdom bombings), and the Liwat al-Furqan (comprised mostly of Russian-speakers from the Caucasus who distinguished themselves as snipers). Between them, the three brigades had around 10,000 mujahedin when they were taken out of Mosul. Since then, many of their mujahedin have been sent clandestinely back to their home countries to spread and escalate the Jihad. Thus, Obaidi will have a Jihadist force of around 50,000 mujahedin that is likely to be committed to the next phase of Jihad - the liberation of Islam's Holy Shrines.

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Unlike previous reporting of Baghdadi's demise, this time there are discernable activities among seniors of the Islamic State/Caliphate. Starting July 11th and even more so the 12th, several seniors started posturing in effort to grab power. There are contradictory moves implying power struggles to come. In Cairo, prominent Islamist Imams normally consulted by the Islamic State/Caliphate leadership about the religious aspects of major moves



reported that “the delay in naming a new leader of the Islamic State proves that the members of the extremist group are vying for leadership.”

According to the Egyptian luminaries, several Caliphate leaders are pursuing the possibility that the new leader “will move to a new stronghold in Afghanistan or south of the Philippines” because the situation of the Islamic State/Caliphate in al-Jazira will become untenable after the anticipated fall of Mosul and Raqqa. There is a distinct possibility that the Islamic State/Caliphate will shift its center to its Wilayat Khorasan in northern Afghanistan and the Fergana Valley (after all, al-Qaida’s global Jihad is also being run from the region). The names of two prominent leaders are being mentioned in this context: The Uzbek Uthman Ghazi (the leader of the Jundullah responsible for the Jihad in northern Afghanistan, Central Asia and Xinjiang), and the Tajik Gulmurod Khalimov (the former US-trained Special Forces Colonel from Tajikistan who distinguished himself as the commander of the Caliphate forces in northern Iraq before being dispatched to take over the Jundullah forces in Wilayat Khorasan).

Meanwhile, Iraqi and Iranian Intelligence report that Iyad al-Obaidi has already started making unilateral moves to seize and consolidate power. The Iraqi reports originate from Jabbar al-Maamouri, a leader at the (Iran-controlled Iraqi Shiite) Popular Mobilization Forces that are operating in the Hawija area. However, there are significant differences between reports of Iranian and Iraqi Intelligence, with Tehran reporting Obaidi as a self-declared “leader” - the more likely title he’d assume - and Baghdad calling him “Caliph” - a title to which Obaidi is not entitled. On 11 July, Tehran reported, Obaidi “declared himself a new supreme leader” of the Islamic State/Caliphate. According to Maamouri, “Abu Haitham al-Obaidi ... dissented from the group and named himself a new Caliph after Baghdadi’s death reports were confirmed.” Obaidi is holed in the western side of Hawija, preparing for a “decisive” confrontation. “Hawija is bracing for a bloody infighting among IS members, the most violent since the group took over Hawija in June 2014,” Maamouri reported. Clashes already broke out among rival factions in Tal-Afar. If permitted to spread, these infighting over Baghdadi’s empty seat will do more harm to the Islamic State/Caliphate than all the efforts of both the US- and Russia-led coalitions.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

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