



Baghdadi's Audio Message

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Executive Summary

- * Confirmation of the fate of the leader of the Islamic State/Caliphate Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi still eludes.
- * On 28 September, the Caliphate released an audio message from Baghdadi that covered explanations for key challenges facing the Islamic State/Caliphate and instructions for the next phase in the Jihad.
- * Forensically, the audio message is far from conclusive. Experts were unable to confirm that the message was indeed read by Baghdadi.
- * There are no other indications of Baghdadi's involvement with any recent activities or communications. This reinforces the reports that Baghdadi was indeed killed back in late-May. Even if Baghdadi is still alive and plotting the next Jihad in a desert hideout - he has certainly become irrelevant to the waging of the current Jihad. Irrespective of who recorded the late-September audio message attributed to Baghdadi - the Baghdadi era in the Islamic State/Caliphate is all but over.

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Analysis

Confirmation of the fate of the leader of the Islamic State/Caliphate Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi still eludes. Reliable sources continue to deliver contradictory reports about his fate. There is no verifiable conclusive evidence whether he is alive or dead. According to senior Kurdish intelligence officials, Baghdadi was still alive in mid-September. He was, according to their sources, "hiding out in the desert somewhere near the border between Syria and Iraq and [was] plotting to wage a new wave of terrorist attacks across European countries, seeking revenge for disastrous defeats inflicted on his terrorist organization in the Middle-East." Senior Syrian and Russian intelligence officials keep insisting Baghdadi was killed back in late-May 2017.¹

On 28 September, the Caliphate's al-Furqan Media released a 46-minute audio message "by Abu Bakr al-Hussayni al-Qurayshi al-Baghdadi" titled "But Sufficient Is Your Lord as a Guide and a Helper" (that is derived from the Quran's Sura al-Furqan 25:31: "And thus have We made for every prophet an enemy from among the criminals. But sufficient is your Lord as a guide and a helper."). This is the first audio message attributed to Baghdadi since November 2016.

The message covered explanations for key challenges facing the Islamic State/Caliphate and instructions for the next phase in the Jihad. The message also included references to recent events such as the North Korean nuclear threats to the US and Japan, as well as references about the just held Astana conference, in order to demonstrate that it was recorded only recently.

"Baghdadi" started by arguing that despite all appearances to the contrary, the overall developments in the world are favorable for the Jihad. "The US, which presents itself as the only world power, is losing its status as one that stands at the head of the world's nations. It has become a fatigued country preoccupied by massive debts," he explained. This is setting the ground for the collapse of the US. "This will drag other countries into the abyss." The decline of the US already affects the situation in the Middle East, "Baghdadi" explained, because "Russia is taking advantage of the American weakness to show it is the alternative world power." Russia is proving "the US has no voice" in world affairs.

Therefore, the Jihadists must not succumb to the prevailing impressions of setbacks and demise. "Beware of retreat, or the feeling of defeat, beware of negotiations or surrender. Do not lay down your arms," he excoriated his followers. "What have you gained from the conferences of humiliation and the crumbs of supporters except appeasing the Alawites and surrendering your homes?" He noted that "America, Europe and Russia are living in a state of terror fearing the strikes" by the mujahedin. It is imperative to capitalize on this.

¹ For discussion of the initial reaction to the reported death of Baghdadi see: Bodansky, Yossef, *After Baghdadi?*, in: ISPSW Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy, issue 497, July 2017, Berlin
http://www.ispsw.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/497_Bodansky.pdf
in: Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich, issue 497, July 2017, ETH Zurich
<http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/specialinterest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/84a88e20-ba68-4ec3-94b9-250e6d309d38>
See also: Bodansky, Yossef, *Chartering an uncertain course in the caliphate*, in: ISPSW Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy, issue 506, September 2017, Berlin
http://www.ispsw.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/506_Bodansky.pdf
in: Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich, issue 506, September 2017, ETH Zurich
<http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/ace6e45e-5341-4079-b38f-1d07eef5f5f>



"Oh soldiers of the Caliphate, heroes of Islam and carriers of banners: light a fire against your enemies. ...

"Oh soldiers of the Caliphate, fan the flames of war on your enemies, take it to them and besiege them in every corner, and stand fast and courageous. ...

"Oh soldiers of Islam in every location, increase blow after blow, and make the media centers of the infidels, and where they wage their intellectual wars, among your targets."

"Baghdadi" urged the Jihadists all over the world to escalate and expand the Jihad in their homelands. "Fight them and ambush them everywhere," he demanded. "Don't you dare allow the Crusaders and the apostates to enjoy a good and comfortable life at home while your brothers are enduring killings, shelling and destruction." Stressing the importance of self-martyrdom, "Baghdadi" reminded of the rewards of martyrdom waiting in heaven, including "72 wives" from among "the maidens of paradise".

"Baghdadi" next addressed the recent Jihadist defeats suffered in both Syria and Iraq. "This predicament is a generous gift from God," he argued. The Jihadists are being tested by Allah on the eve of a fateful event. "The leaders of the Islamic State and its soldiers have realized that the path to ... victory is to be patient and resist the infidels whatever their alliances. ... Victory against their enemies and the enemy of God comes next," he assured. "Baghdadi" added that events on the ground "are the best proof of the failure of the coalition of infidels who stand against the steadfastness of the soldiers of the Caliphate."

"Baghdadi" acknowledged territorial losses of the Jihadist forces. However, even in withdrawal, the Jihadists set an exemplary precedent for future victory as provided by Allah. "In Mosul, they [the mujahedin] defiantly stood firm on a land ruled by God's laws against the infidels and nations of the cross ... only leaving it over their skulls and dead bodies after nearly a year of fighting." Thus, these are temporary setbacks, and therefore, all mujahedin must "hold on. Allah will help you against your enemy, if you are patient. The Syrian and Kurdish regimes will become extinct. They are too despicable to fight you." For example, the forces fighting the Jihadists in Syria would "not last an hour" without the air support from Russia and the US.

Therefore, the mujahedin throughout the greater Middle East must persevere and escalate in order to not "allow lives lost in Mosul, Sirte, Raqqa, and Hama be lost in vain." He called on all Sunni Muslims to rise up and shake the "dust of humiliation" off their clothes. "Oh Sunnis of Iraq, Syria, Yemen and everywhere ... get out of your beds and shake off oppression ... return to your faith and restore your glory and eminence."

"Baghdadi" concluded and summed up his message defiantly if realistically. The ultimate priority for all Muslims is to "satisfy God," he explained. "Victory against the enemies and the enemy of God comes next." The Jihadists are presently being put to a divine test of their perseverance and faith. "With God's will and his strength, we are staying determined, patient," he stated. "The abundance of killing will not stop us. ... The sons of Islam will willingly continue to sacrifice their blood and bodies for the sake of their Creator."

In and by itself, this audio message cannot constitute a proof that Baghdadi is still alive. To be accepted as legitimate and thus followed - such an important and authoritative message for the future of Jihad must come from "Baghdadi". There is no other leader in the Jihadist trend, and particularly the Islamic State/Caliphate, with a theological authority even coming close to Baghdadi's. Therefore, if the Caliphate's leaders want the message and guidance to be accepted - they must attribute it to Baghdadi - and so they did.



Forensically, the audio message is far from conclusive. Experts were unable to confirm that the message was indeed read by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The quality of the posted recording is too bad to permit conclusive voice recognition analysis. This raises the possibility that the current leaders of the Islamic State/Caliphate could have used a narrator with a voice and diction similar to Baghdadi's to both ensure that the authority of the new message is accepted and to assure Baghdadi's followers that he was still alive without saying so.

Meanwhile, there are no other indications of Baghdadi's involvement with any recent activities or communications of the Islamic State/Caliphate. Since early August, there were several major evacuations of senior commanders and luminaries of Islam from Deir ez-Zor and Mayadin (in Syria), and Hawija (in Iraq). In none of these was there any indication of the evacuation of a senior leader such as Baghdadi.

As well, regional leaders affiliated with the Caliphate continue to consolidate authority and power in their respective areas without any consultation with higher authorities in the Middle East. For example, the internal communications concerning the ambush killing of four US Special Forces along with five Nigerien soldiers as well as the wounding of two other Americans and several Nigerien troops in Niger identified the Islamic State in Greater Sahara as the perpetrator. This is a new entity. Yet, there is no evidence of communications with the Middle East requesting approval compared to the correspondence Boko Haram had held before being recognized as a Province of the Islamic State/Caliphate. Similarly, in early October, the top leaders of the Taliban in Afghanistan initiated discussions on the end of conflict with the local Islamic State commanders. While Taliban leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada approved of the negotiations and personally instructed his forces to not attack the Islamic State - there are no comparable instructions from Baghdadi or other senior leaders in the Middle East. Simply put, there is no sign of Baghdadi's involvement in, or even awareness of, any major or minor operation throughout the Caliphate and its affiliates.

The Islamic State/Caliphate claimed responsibility for the Las Vegas carnage on the night of 1 October and declared the shooting a major operation. The Islamic State/Caliphate's Amaq published three messages claiming responsibility and providing details. Other organs of the Caliphate followed suit. According to the Amaq communique, Stephen Paddock was "a soldier of the Islamic State" who struck out "in response to calls to target coalition countries." Amaq claimed that "The Las Vegas attacker converted to Islam a few months ago." Amaq explained that Paddock swore allegiance to Baghdadi and adopted the nome-de-guerre "Abu Abdul Bar al-Amriki" soon afterwards. He committed to "specifically answering the call" of Baghdadi to strike Las Vegas. He struck out after "accurate monitoring of the Crusaders" in the area. For the operation itself, the "soldier of the Caliphate" was "equipped with machine guns and ammunition" for a major strike. "From a hotel overlooking a music concert, [he] opened fire on one of the groups, leaving 600 dead or injured, until using up his ammunition and becoming a martyr."

Although Amaq is considered the most authoritative organ of the Caliphate that so far was highly reliable and accurate - there is no independent confirmation of a connection between Paddock and the Islamic State/Caliphate. (There is no evidence or confirmation that he was NOT a Jihadist either.) But this is irrelevant for throughout the entire Muslim World the grassroots are convinced in the veracity of the claims made in the Amaq communique and subsequent Jihadist reporting. Hence, the mention of Baghdadi's personal involvement with Paddock only months beforehand, and the absence of any comment from Baghdadi regarding what is being claimed as a major victory for Jihad, are telling. The authors of the communique were unable to point out to a recent involvement by Baghdadi and/or to a statement of his praising the carnage ostensibly inspired by his calls to arms.



Thus, the continued absence of Baghdadi from ongoing activities and communications of the Islamic State/Caliphate reinforces the reports that Baghdadi was indeed killed back in late-May. However, even if Baghdadi is still alive and plotting the next Jihad in a desert hideout - he has certainly become irrelevant to the waging of the current Jihad. Irrespective of who recorded the late-September audio message attributed to Baghdadi - the Baghdadi era in the Islamic State/Caliphate is all but over.

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.

He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports.

Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.



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