



Charting an Uncertain Course in the Caliphate

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Executive Summary

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* Most indicative of the post-Baghdadi era is the sudden and concurrent rise of local senior leaders in the far flung “provinces” of the Islamic State/Caliphate. They introduce an era of greater autonomy resulting from the absence of the all-encompassing central authority of al-Baghdadi and his coterie.

* Hence, even in the unlikely case he is alive – Baghdadi is no longer relevant to the evolving Jihad and the fate of the Islamic State/Caliphate. A decentralized and wrathful new Caliphate is rising from the ashes of Baghdadi’s Islamic State with its swarms of incited, indoctrinated and well-trained Jihadists ready to strike and torment the kuffar in each and every corner of the world. His namesake more likely dead than alive – Baghdadi’s horrific global Jihad has just begun.

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Analysis

Despite the ongoing flow of contradictory reports about the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – all other activities in and around the Islamic State/Caliphate leave no doubt that the Baghdadi era is effectively over. The institutions and leaders of the Islamic State/Caliphate did not change their activities in the aftermath of previous announcements of Baghdadi's death or incapacitation. This time, since mid-July 2017, the overall pattern of behavior of the upper echelons of the Islamic State/Caliphate is completely different. The senior leaders throughout the Islamic State/Caliphate no longer expect the Baghdadi-level of central guidance on theological issues from any supreme guide in the Middle East.¹

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Two major issues reinforce the conclusion that Baghdadi is indeed dead.

First is the on-going evacuation from Deir ez-Zor of senior leaders including members of the 12-member negotiating committee. The evacuation has been accelerating as Syrian military forces close in on the city and the bombing by the Russian and Syrian Air Forces intensify. According to reports of Iraqi intelligence, Baghdadi was still alive and hiding in the eastern parts of Deir ez-Zor at the time his target killing was reported by the Russians. However, the very detailed and extensive data collected about the evacuation do not include Baghdadi by name or an alluding to a uniquely senior figure. Similarly, even though US Intelligence claims Baghdadi is probably alive somewhere in or around the Middle Euphrates River Valley between Iraq and Syria – there are no Jihadist movements and communications in the area that even allude to the presence of senior leaders. Moreover, as more elements of the senior leadership are making their way to the triangle between of the cities Bukamal (in Syria), Hawija and al-Qaim (in Iraq) where the main Jihadist forces are concentrated – Baghdadi is not among them.

Second, the name of the new Caliph – Baghdadi's successor – has been floated for the first time. He is Tarad Muhammad al-Jarba (born November 1979), better known by his nome-de-guerre Abu Muhammad al-Shimali. Al-Shimali is a member of the Saudi branch of the al-Jarba branch of the Shammar nation of tribes that resides between northern al-Jazira and just north of Riyadh. He claims he was born in southwestern Iraq during the wandering of his tribe. However, he is Saudi and thus qualifies as a Caliph. (The al-Jarba branch of the Shammar is also extremely important in the Syrian Sunni Arab power structure and key opposition leader – Ahmad al-Jarba – hails from the Syrian branch.)

Abu Muhammad al-Shimali joined al-Qaida in Iraq already in 2005. He was one of the first Islamic scholars who rallied around Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. He also participated in several clashes and raids against US forces. He joined al-Baghdadi with the establishment of DI'ISH. He is popularly considered the Caliphate's "leader in Bilad al-Sham" and was recently nominated as the head of the eight-member Shurah council – Baghdadi's main advisory body. Al-Shimali is one of the leading scholars on conducting Jihadist terrorism at the heart of the

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
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West, Russia and China. He rose to prominence during the formulation of the Dar ul-Kuffar. His involvement has been very practical and hands on. Abu Muhammad al-Shimali personally indoctrinated European Jihadists prior to their return to Europe and the launch of self-martyrdom strikes. In many cases he personally escorted the would-be Jihadists to the Syria-Turkey border in order to bolster their resolve. Some of the participants in the November 2015 attacks in Paris were among al-Shimali's proteges.

Among the individuals expected to rise to prominence on the coattails of Abu Muhammad al-Shimali are two young commanders with French and Réunion Island background: Fabien Clain and Jean Michael. Fabien Clain (born 1977/8) is a native of Réunion Island who grew up in Toulouse, France, and holds French nationality. He converted to Islam in the 1990's and was completely radicalized by the early 2000's. He was in French prison in 2009-14 for terrorism-related offenses. Immediately after his release, he escaped to Syria and assumed a leading role in sponsorship of, and support for, European Jihad. In late 2015, Fabien Clain claimed responsibility for the Paris massacre in the name of the Islamic State/Caliphate in an audio communique. Jean Michael (born around 1983) is another French Jihadist of a Réunion background who has been serving as a confidant and assistant of Fabien Clain.

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In practical terms, most indicative of the post-Baghdadi era is the sudden and concurrent rise of local senior leaders in the far flung "provinces" of the Islamic State/Caliphate. These new leaders introduce an era of greater autonomy resulting from the absence of the all-encompassing central authority of al-Baghdadi and his coterie.

The region with the most distinct Islamist-Jihadist character has long been Wilayat Khorasan in northern Afghanistan and the Fergana Valley. Starting the second half of July, Jihadist leaders have recommended that the leadership of the Islamic State/Caliphate move to the region just like al-Qaida's top leaders and the Shura Kabira.

The posture of the two top leaders in the region already exceed their immediate areas. The Uzbek Uthman Ghazi is the leader of the Jundullah and thus is responsible for the Jihad in northern Afghanistan, Central Asia, Xinjiang and Russia's underbelly. Despite his stormy disengagement from al-Qaida, Uthman Ghazi retains extensive and close relations with Ayman al-Zawahiri and his Shura Kabira, as well as the Taliban's top leaders. The military leader in the area is the Tajik Gulmurod Khalimov. He is a 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. Hence, he is very close to the entire uppermost leadership of the Islamic State/Caliphate in the Middle East. As well, the uppermost leaders of the Wilayat Khorasan have close relations with prominent financiers of the Jihad from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf State that go back to the anti-Soviet Jihad of the 1980's and the Jihad in Chechnya and Dagestan.

Africa, however, is the area where the most important developments have been taking place in the last few months.

First among these is the entire Maghreb. After the fall of Sirte, the regional center of the Islamic State/Caliphate is Wilayat al-Tarabulus that stretches between the shores of the Mediterranean and the Jabel Akhdar mountains, and from the Sirte area in the east to Kabila, Algeria, in the west. In practical terms, the Wilayat al-Tarabulus is considered the center of the Islamic State/Caliphate in contemporary Libya and the entire Maghreb to the Strait of Gibraltar.



The current bastion of the Wilayat al-Tarabulus is in the town of Sabratha on the Mediterranean coast about 40 miles west of Tripoli and some 60 miles from the Tunisian border. This area has long been one of the centers of neo-Salafism. Back in late-2014, when al-Baghdadi dispatched Sufian al-Ghazali to establish a foothold in the strongly al-Qaida-affiliated Maghreb – his entry point was Sabratha.

The quick resurrection of the Islamic State/Caliphate is the work of Jalaluddin al-Tunisi (real name Muhammad Ben Salem al-Ayouni/al-Oyoni) who is now the undisputed leader of the Jihad in the Maghreb and a viable successor of al-Baghdadi. In late Fall 2016, with the fall of Sirte imminent, Baghdadi personally nominated Jalaluddin al-Tunisi as the Emir of the entire Maghreb. His mission has been to resurrect the Jihad quickly and resume strike operations. Indeed, the Jihadist forces that escaped Sirte reestablished a strong bastion in the Sabratha area. In early Summer 2017, they started building a new training infrastructure in western Libya for Jihadists arriving from the Middle East via western Africa, as well as from the Maghreb and the Maghrebi communities in western Europe. According to a Libyan senior intelligence official, the local Islamic State/Caliphate forces in the Sabratha area now include a hard core of around “five to seven thousand people of different nationalities.”

Other African Islamist-Jihadist leaders are also rising as global Jihad evolves in the wake of the dramatic changes in the Middle East. However, these leaders exert more influence and power in their immediate regions – that are quite huge – but are yet to spread their influence on a global scale.

Mokhtar Belmokhtar is the most prominent leader of the Jihadist trend in the Maghreb, the Sahel and the entire western Africa. He remains fiercely loyal to Ayman al-Zawahiri. However, as the Islamic State/Caliphate has been rising to become the preeminent Jihadist trend in the entire region – Belmokhtar’s standing has evolved into defining a unique African Jihad combining Baghdadi’s message with loyalty to the Jihadist roots established by Osama bin Laden. In Summer 2017, his distinct blend of African Jihad has become the dominant Jihadist-terrorist driving force at the Heart of Africa even when its leader – Mokhtar Belmokhtar – has gone underground once again. The emerging public face of African Jihad is Iyad Ag Ghaly, a veteran Tuareg Jihadist with long association with Belmokhtar. He is the leader of the new Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims) – a coalition of a myriad of Jihadist entities throughout the Sahel.

The other leader of growing importance is the Boko Haram’s Abubakar Shekau (aka Imam Abu Muhammed Abubakar bin Muhammed Shekau but real name is not known). Since 2010, he has led the Boko Haram in the marked escalation of armed Jihad against Nigeria and its neighbors. As well, he oversaw the radicalization of the Islamist-Jihadist trend to the point of moving into the fold of the Islamic State/Caliphate and becoming “The Islamic State’s West Africa Province”. In Fall 2016, Shekau integrated fully the Fulani traditional nomadic routes just off the Gulf of Guinea all the way to Senegal into the structural dynamics of “The Islamic State’s West Africa Province”. In early July 2017, Shekau returned to the Islamist-Jihadist media after more than a year of absence. He reiterated the core-message of the Islamic State/Caliphate beyond the Baghdadi levels of advocacy – proving his commitment to the Caliphate’s core message.

Finally, since Summer 2016, the Islamic State/Caliphate has been stressing the importance of the Philippines as their center in the Far East. The establishment of the Far Eastern Wilayat of the Islamic State/Caliphate with its center in Mindanao, the Philippines, was announced in June. The Wilayat brought together Filipino, Indonesian, and Malaysian Jihadist leaders who had pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi in the name of various Jihadist factions in their homelands. The leaders of the Wilayat also urged all Muslims to join the Jihad in the Middle East, to make their way to Mindanao, or to wage the Jihad at their own homelands.



However, there are doubts as to the extent of the Wilayat's viability in the Far East. For example, the main spokesman is a Malaysian named Abu Oun al-Malysi or al-Malysione (real name Mohd Rafi Udin) who is known to be in Syria. The Wilayat commander is Abu Abdallah al-Filipini (real name Isnilon Hapilon) – the erstwhile leader of the Abu Sayyaf group. Abu Abdallah al-Filipini openly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State/Caliphate and to al-Baghdadi already in September 2014. In June 2016, Abu Oun al-Malysi/al-Malysione urged all Muslims in the Far East to swear allegiance to al-Baghdadi and accept the regional leadership of Abu Abdallah al-Filipini “who is appointed by the Islamic State to be the leader of the Caliphate soldiers in the Philippines.” In early July, the Islamic State/Caliphate announced the forming of the Katibat al-Muhajir (the Emigrant's Battalion) under the direct command of Abu Abdallah al-Filipini. The Battalion is comprised of a group of expert foreign Jihadists who had arrived in the Philippines from neighboring countries and elite Filipino Jihadists that are being trained by the Muhajireen.

Although the ongoing Jihadist rebellion in the Philippine city of Marawi has earned the local Jihadists great respect throughout the Jihadist elites – the overall prominence of Abu Abdallah al-Filipini has not improved. This is because of the absence of any theological work coming out of the Philippines (and the entire Far East) and because of the reticence of the various Jihadist entities to fully unify under a single banner even though all local commanders recognize the prominence of Abu Abdallah al-Filipini and cooperate closely with him. Hence, the Jihad in the Far East remains beholden to the leadership in the Middle East via local representatives such as Abu Oun al-Malysi/al-Malysione. However, with the overall decentralization of the Islamic State/Caliphate and the deterioration of communications, Abu Abdallah al-Filipini might still rise into greater prominence in regional Jihad.

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Thus, as the campaign of speculations regarding the ultimate fate of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi continues to unfold, and as new reports and rumors about his fate keep popping up – events within the Islamic State/Caliphate are unmistakable. The flow of propaganda and indoctrination from the multiple outlets of the Islamic State/Caliphate hails the perseverance and triumphs of the various mujahedin and their local commanders, but fails to mention any instructions or guidance from al-Baghdadi. Nor are there any indications of a coherent guidance for the advocated global Jihad.

The latest issue of the Caliphate's magazine *Rumiyah* (Rome), published in early August 2017, points to the ignorance of the kuffar (the infidels) when it comes to the zeal and determination of all Jihadists. “These people [the kuffar] do not understand. They cannot grasp that every soldier of the Khilafah is ... seeking to be killed in Allah's cause. Yes, the soldiers of the Islamic State - without exception – are all prepared to fight in the cause of Allah down to their last drop of blood. And so, we give glad tidings to the kuffar that the soldiers of the Khilafah will conquer the land of Sham [Syria-Iraq] in its entirety, even if after some time, and will eventually reach their lands [of origin], with Allah's permission. ... And as long as the Book of Allah remains in the breasts of those seeking its implementation, then let the kuffar be prepared to confront armies marching forth in order to shed their blood.” Simply put, motivated by Jihadist veterans returning from the Middle East, the Jihad spreads and escalates on its own wherever Muslims dwell and can reach out and strike at infidels.

Thus, there remains the unwavering zealot commitment to the tenets of traditionalist Jihad as articulated in the Khorasan Pledge of Spring 2014, and the ever intensifying urging for both self-motivated martyrdom throughout the Dar ul-Kuffar and heroism on the many fronts of Jihad. Hence, even in the unlikely case he is alive – Baghdadi is no longer relevant to this evolving Jihad and the fate of the Islamic State/Caliphate.



However, Baghdadi's vision of, and original call for, an everlasting and spreading Jihad is being implemented by a new generation of self-motivated Jihadists. A decentralized and wrathful new Caliphate is rising from the ashes of Baghdadi's Islamic State with its swarms of incited, indoctrinated and well-trained Jihadists ready to strike and torment the kuffar in each and every corner of the world. His namesake more likely dead than alive – Baghdadi's horrific global Jihad has just begun.

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

About the Author of this Issue

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