

What Does Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's Death Mean for the Future of ISIS?

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On the night of 26 to 27 October 2019, United States (US) special forces killed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi (from now on referred to as 'Baghdadi') during a raid in northwest Syria.[1] For years, Baghdadi has been the public face and leader of the jihadist group ISIS that managed to control large swathes of Iraq and Syria during its heydays. However, in 2019, the organisation lost control over the last physical part of its former 'caliphate', forcing it to go underground and adapt its strategy to fighting an insurgency using sleeper cells.[2] The death of Baghdadi can be seen as a significant symbolic blow to ISIS as the group lost both its physical territory and its leader in a short time. However, by mid-2020, the number of attacks conducted by ISIS cells in Iraq and Syria had already taken an uptick, engendering fears that "the group has entered a new, although unstable, phase of recovery".[3] This raises the question of how important the death of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi has been for the future of ISIS.

In this essay, it will be argued that Baghdadi's death is an important symbolic loss for ISIS, but will not determine the future of ISIS. It will be argued that ISIS and its predecessors have overcome the death of their leaders before, that present-day ISIS mainly operates as a decentralised insurgent group, and that the future of ISIS is strongly dependent on the local dynamics and opportunities in Iraq and Syria.

It should be noted that present-day ISIS, or in this case the Islamic State (IS), is a global franchise that has affiliates outside the area of Iraq and Syria. Nevertheless, this essay will focus on IS within the geographical boundaries of Iraq and Syria, because Baghdadi himself stemmed from this specific branch and its future is rooted in the regional dynamics of this area. Moreover, scholars disagree about the extent, to which the central IS leadership controls and determines the actions of its affiliates, thereby rendering a claim about the impact of Baghdadi's death on IS's affiliates difficult.[4]

To understand the future directions ISIS might take and the impact of Baghdadi's death, it is crucial to take the history of ISIS into account. The scholar Slim contends that the origins of ISIS should be traced back to the power vacuum in Iraq following the US invasion and toppling of the Saddam regime in 2003.[5] The Sunni Arabs, constituting roughly 20 percent of Iraq's population, controlled many important posts in Iraq during Saddam's regime. Following the US military victory, the US took measures that curbed Sunni access to state power, which were regarded as a significant blow to the Sunni Arab population of Iraq.[6] It is in this power vacuum of post-invasion Iraq that many militant groups emerged who were willing to fight the US-occupation of Iraq and, according to Mandaville, "[d]isaffected Sunnis (...) were happy to cooperate with or even join active resistance against the occupying forces".[7] The origins of ISIS date back to a militant group founded by al-Zarqawi, which came to affiliate itself with al-Qaeda in 2004 and called itself al-Qaeda in Iraq.[8] In 2006, al-Zarqawi was killed by the US military. He was succeeded by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and the group rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).[9] ISI attempted to establish a physical Islamic caliphate in Iraq, however, according to the researcher Hashim, it did not possess the required capacities to do so, and it disenfranchised its Sunni support base by over-relying on the use of terror. This, in turn, led to the establishment of the *Sahwa* movement, in which "tribes and Sunni insurgents allied with (...) the United States, to fight ISI".[10] This resulted in a significant setback to the military capacities of ISI, and this defeat was further compounded by a US-Iraqi attack that killed ISI's leaders in 2010.[11]

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Nevertheless, the killed ISI leader was succeeded by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and under his leadership, ISI re-emerged during 2010 and 2013. Hashim points out several factors, which were crucial for ISI's revival, among which: "the dysfunctional nature of the Iraqi state and its growing conflict with the Sunni population; (...) and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war".[12] These two factors are still prominent as of now, in 2021. In short, between 2010 and 2013, US military forces withdrew from Iraq and the Sunni *Sahwa* movement was disbanded by the Shi'a Iraqi prime minister al-Maliki. In addition, al-Maliki further cracked down on Sunni leaders and groups, thereby alienating Sunni Iraqis.[13] Meanwhile, in 2011, the Syrian Civil War broke out. ISI eagerly exploited this vacuum and sent fighters to participate in this conflict theatre. These fighters established the group Jabhat al-Nusra (JN).[14] In 2013, disagreement about a merger of ISI and JN into the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (Syria) led JN to break away, while the newly established ISIS broke its ties with Al-Qaeda.[15] Consequently, ISIS managed to capture large parts of Iraq and Syria. However, the expansion of the caliphate sparked international and regional intervention. In the ensuing years, ISIS was pushed back by a wide range of actors ranging from a US-led international coalition, local armed forces, and militias to Russia and Iran.[16] This resulted in the territorial demise of ISIS's territory as the last town in their hands, Baghouz, fell on the 23rd of March 2019.[17]

Regarding the impact of Baghdadi's death in 2019 on the future of ISIS, it is likely to be not so significant. Although Baghdadi had major symbolic and ideological value as the founder of the first caliphate in the modern era, ISIS has operated as a decentralised organisation before and has managed to overcome earlier defeats and losses of its leaders. Zelin, an expert on jihadism, adds that Baghdadi's death will not be consequential, because "the group has had a plan for how to survive its loss of territory (...), drawing on lessons from its setbacks in the period from 2007 to 2009".[18] Moreover, he argues that present-day ISIS is in a stronger position than its earlier iteration was after 2009 and that ISIS is firmly embedded locally in Iraq and Syria.[19] Given the earlier resilience shown by ISIS's predecessors to regroup, resurge and exploit (political) vacuums, Baghdadi's death will not be instrumental in shaping ISIS's future. Instead, to assess the future of ISIS after Baghdadi, it is essential to look at the present-day situation in Iraq and Syria to see how a resurgence might develop and which opportunities ISIS can exploit.

Despite a recent military victory over ISIS, the socio-economic and political root causes leading to the rise of Baghdadi's ISIS are still in place in Iraq. Therefore, if these causes are left unaddressed, Iraq continues to provide a breeding ground for ISIS. From ISI's re-emergence in Iraq, several lessons can be learned. These are that Iraq's non-inclusive and sectarian governance system drives disenfranchised Sunnis in the hands of extremist organisations. In addition, it shows that the Iraqi security forces were not and are not capable of fighting ISI(S) without US (or international) military support.[20] Further, an umbrella organisation of mostly Shi'a militias, known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), also played a key role in the fight against ISIS. Yet, according to Helfont, the actions of the PMF endanger alienating Sunnis as these militias have been involved in atrocities against Sunni Arabs in the areas that were reclaimed from ISIS.[21] Furthermore, Iraq faces many challenges, which, if they are left undealt, will provide a fertile ground for ISIS to resurge. Specific examples of these are the fate of 1.8 million internally displaced Iraqis, the devastation of Iraqi cities, especially in the Sunni areas of Iraq, and a perceived lack of injustice among Sunnis because the focus of criminal persecution appears to be centred around ISIS members, while members of the PMF and the Iraqi security services who committed atrocities go free.[22] Furthermore, in 2020, Al-Hashimi noted that ISIS's new (Iraqi) leaders declared the beginning of a new period, in which they would "reinvigorate the group's relationship with other armed factions and launch a reconciliation process with the Sunni community".[23] Therefore, feelings of Sunni marginalisation continue to persist, and if ISIS does indeed show itself to be adept in exploiting these perceptions, Iraq may provide opportunities for ISIS resurgence once again.

In Syria, the civil war still drags on, and its politically unstable environment provides an opportunity for ISIS to regain strength. Khatib contends that after the territorial defeat of ISIS and the death of Baghdadi, ISIS cells are primarily embedded in the northeast and centre of Syria and that they are focused on exploiting emerging opportunities.[24] In southeastern Syria, Sunni Arab tribes constitute a majority, but their areas are controlled by either the Kurdish or Syrian regime and Iranian (supported) fighters. Khatib argues that a lack of acceptance of these external rulers translates into popular and actual support to ISIS sleeper cells conducting attacks in these regions.[25] ISIS in eastern Syria is currently being contained by the local Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), supported by US-led coalition forces. However, Khatib warns that "local tensions are the main fuel for ISIS resurgence, while the ground presence of coalition forces remains the greatest ISIS deterrent".[26] Furthermore, Lister contends that "all of

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the necessary ingredients for an ISIS resurgence remain prevalent in Iraq and especially in Syria".[27] These conditions are aggravated by the initial withdrawal of US forces from northeast Syria and a Turkish invasion of territories previously under the control of the SDF.[28] However, according to James Jeffrey, the former (US) Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, ISIS's most significant activities currently occur in the government-held parts of central Syria.[29] Moreover, writing in December 2020, Jeffrey makes the point that ISIS retains its capability to recruit fighters, despite being nominally militarily defeated: "ISIS (...) appeal to potential recruits appears similar to the period of the caliphate. (...) Its local recruitment in Iraq and Syria is also fuelled by its anti-Shiite ideology and opposition to the (apostate) government in Damascus and the (Shiite-dominated) government in Baghdad." [30] This view of ISIS re-establishing itself in central Syria is corroborated by recent research by the scholars Waters and Winter. They determine that ISIS could well be using the remote terrain of central Syria as a safe base to train its fighters and conduct and coordinate external campaigns.[31] In sum, as of now, ISIS has the capability to actively recruit, and train fighters, and it continues to destabilise Sunni Arab tribal areas in south-eastern Syria. Given the fact that the containment of ISIS in the areas controlled by the SDF is dependent on assistance by the US-led coalition and that withdrawing US soldiers from Syria has often been on the table in Washington, the future of this support is uncertain.[32] Therefore, a political move, such as the withdrawal of US forces from Syria in several years, could well have the same impact as the American withdrawal from Iraq after the initial 'victory' over ISI and allow ISIS to revive.

In conclusion, the future of ISIS will not depend on Baghdadi, because ISIS is a resilient and now decentralised insurgent group that has shown to be able to overcome the death of its leaders. ISIS's future will be most dependent on the extent to which it can exploit opportunities in Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, the socioeconomic and political system of Sunni marginalisation is still in place. If Iraq fails to come up with a more inclusive model of governance, it risks driving disenfranchised Sunnis into the hands of ISIS once again. In Syria, ISIS continues to play a role in the south-eastern Arab tribal areas, exploiting feelings of disgruntlement with external rulers, and it even actively works on strengthening its capacities in the central Syrian Desert. In both (eastern) Syria and Iraq, US-led military intervention has been instrumental in militarily curbing the rise of ISIS. As US foreign troop deployments are under increasing scrutiny and discussion, there is a possibility that US forces will be withdrawn from either or both countries in the next years. This risks a repeat of the earlier US withdrawal from Iraq, leaving behind local forces which are incapable of fighting off ISIS. Therefore, despite the death of Baghdadi, there remain ample opportunities for ISIS to re-establish itself and resurge once again.

Notes

[1] Chulov, and Safi, "ISIS Leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi Believed Dead in US Raid."

[2] Ibid.

[3] Hassan, "ISIS in Iraq and Syria: Rightsizing the Current 'Comeback'."

[4] Clarke, "What Does the Islamic State's Organisational Restructuring Tell Us?"

[5] Slim, "Iraq: A Conflict over State Identity and Ownership," 164.

[6] Ibid., 165.

[7] Mandaville, "Radical Islam and Jihad Beyond the Nation-state," 369.

[8] Hashim, "The Islamic State: From Al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate," 69-71.

[9] Ibid., 72.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

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[12] Ibid., 73.

[13] Slim, "Iraq: A Conflict over State Identity and Ownership," 172.

[14] Mandaville, "Radical Islam and jihad beyond the nation-state," 170.

[15] Ibid., 171.

[16] Glenn et al., "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State."

[17] Ibid.

[18] Zelin, "Baghdadi Is Dead but His Legend Lives On."

[19] Ibid.

[20] Slim, "Iraq: A Conflict over State Identity and Ownership," 172.

[21] Helfont, "An Arab Option for Iraq," 417.

[22] Slim, "Iraq: A Conflict over State Identity and Ownership," 181 – 182.

[23] Al-Hashimi, "ISIS's New Leadership: Past Lessons in a New Strategic Environment."

[24] Khatib, "Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi: What His Death Means for ISIS in Syria."

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Lister, "Baghdadi's Death is a Major Victory, but It Won't Spell the End of ISIS."

[28] Ibid.

[29] Jeffrey, "Part 1: The Future of ISIS."

[30] Ibid.

[31] Waters, and Winter, "Islamic State Under-Reporting in Central Syria: Misdirection, Misinformation, or Miscommunication," 20.

[32] Lister, "Baghdadi's death is a major victory, but it won't spell the end of ISIS."

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