

Consequences of Caliph Ibrahim's Death—What's Next for the Islamic State?

The death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – the self-proclaimed Caliph Ibrahim and the leader of the Islamic State (IS) that had been hiding in Idlib province in northwestern Syria – triggered a number of analysts to announce a major breakthrough in war against the caliphate and the Islamic extremism in general. It seems, however, that those overly optimistic claims are premature. The Islamic State is apparently capable of existing and functioning without a charismatic leader, such as al-Baghdadi, due to its characteristics, current organisational structure, and the attractiveness of the ideology that this movement represents. Furthermore, given that Caliph Ibrahim had been in hiding for several months in Turkish-controlled areas of Syria – which remain under the influence of Al-Qaeda-linked groups hostile to the Islamic State – it is necessary to raise questions about the political affiliations of the caliphate and its role in the Middle East strategy game.

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The Islamic State was established as a hierarchical and centralised organisation. This simple hierarchical structure has been present in all spheres of caliphate's activity, including the military, political, socio-economic, and finally religious matters of the Islamic State. An emir (and later, after the proclamation of the caliphate, a caliph) was placed at the top of this pyramidal organisation. The lower tiers of administration were controlled by local 'officials' and field officers respectively. A caliph could seek advice regarding the military, taxation, economy, law etc. from small collegial bodies referred to as councils

(*shura*) which consisted of his loyal co-workers and followers. The main objective of this structure was to effectively administer territories controlled by the Islamic State. On the other hand, the pyramidal organisation minimised the number of people who could pose a potential threat to the leader in the future. It is also worth noting that all processes related to decision making were based on territorial characteristics of the Islamic State. The caliphate was divided into provinces (*wilayat*) established in accordance with historical and geographical regions of Iraq and Syria that were conquered by the Islamic State. This administrative division was also applied to 'overseas territories' in North Africa, Middle East, and Southeast Asia. The caliph was practically the only policy maker who exercised his power over the organisation by giving direct orders to his loyal co-workers. All decisions were subsequently transferred to lower tiers of central and provincial administration. Provinces of the Islamic State had a very limited autonomy regarding their basic administrative activities and functions. All major decisions required a personal approval of the caliph and his deputy. The aforementioned decision-making system was one of the fundamental differences between the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. In the latter, the organisation is governed by a collegial body, a consultative council (*majlis al shura*). Despite that the power is nominally in the hands of the leader of Al-Qaeda, he cannot make decisions independently and all policies regarding strategic matters ought to be discussed with deputies, advisors, and members of the council. In contrast, the Islamic State, during its existence as a territorial organisation, did not place much importance on advising bodies and other collegial structures given that only person had ultimate authority over the decision-making process. The demise of the Islamic State in 2017 forced the leadership of the caliphate to change this state of affairs. Nonetheless, even a series of military defeats did not alter the structure of the caliphate and all councils and committees of the Islamic State remained politically irrelevant and practically deprived of decision-making powers.

The Islamic State has been based on organisational and structural patterns inspired by the history of early Muslim states. The caliphate was completely unprepared for a sudden disappearance of its leader in 2017 and, therefore, suffered the same fate as the early *Ummah* that was shocked and partially divided after Muhammad's death. There is no denying that caliphate's governance system started crumbling in 2017, long before al-Baghdadi's death. Territorial losses in Levant were the main reason why al-Baghdadi was

forced to go into hiding and consequently lost real control over the remaining territory of the Islamic State. Since 2017, al-Baghdadi had not been in command of the Islamic State's operations in Levant and overseas provinces. The caliph, however, remained a hero and a symbol for millions of the Islamic State's supporters across the world which resembled the role of late Osama bin Laden in the last years of his life.

The fall of the caliphate's centralised governance system as well as territorial losses in Levant resulted in a dramatic change in management within the IS organisation. The Islamic State's provinces outside of Syria and Iraq have become largely autonomous, particularly in terms of operational activities. From the perspective of the local branches of the Islamic State, the aforementioned changes were considered an organisational revolution on an unprecedented scale given that some of the Islamic State's affiliates, such as Libya, Sinai, and Khorasan, were established by the caliphate's 'head office' and directly controlled by the Islamic State's emissaries who had been anointed by the caliph himself. Currently, the Islamic State's symbolism and legacy is extensively used to spread the influence of those branches, including Boko Haram in Nigeria and Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, which had been established as independent Jihadist militant groups long before joining the Islamic State's caliphate.

Rapid emancipation of provinces as well as a marginal role of collegial advisory bodies are currently the major threat to the consistency of the Islamic State's ideological and political agenda. This issue was clearly visible in the succession process following al-Baghdadi's death. Although the Islamic State announced that Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi – a former Sharia law 'expert' of the Islamic State – had become a new caliph, it remains uncertain whether he was appointed as a successor by al-Baghdadi himself. Even if al-Qurashi was indeed chosen in accordance with al-Baghdadi's last will, there is no guarantee that his appointment will be approved by all regional structures of the Islamic State. It is quite likely that the overseas provinces of the caliphate that did not participate in the 'election' of the new leader may challenge this decision. The collapse of the hierarchical structure of the Islamic State and increasing independence of the provinces may boost local leaders' appetite for power within the caliphate. All the aforementioned issues are connected with the old animosities and frictions between the caliphate's

headquarters dominated by Iraqi, Syrian and Egyptian Arabs and the provinces in West Africa as well as in South and Southeast Asia which are dominated by different nations. Therefore, the current state of affairs may fan the flames of tensions between different fractions of the Islamic State and consequently exacerbate operational capabilities of the organisation after their military defeat in Syria and Iraq and al-Baghdadi's death.

Currently, the Islamic State's organisational structure is becoming more and more similar to Al-Qaeda. This situation seems paradoxical given that the Islamic State was established in opposition to Al-Qaeda in terms of both the ideological programme and the organisational structure. Nonetheless, the latest developments indicate that Osama bin Laden's concepts regarding the organisational structure turned out to be more effective. It is worth noting that Al-Qaeda went through a similar rough patch in the early 2000s when its supply base in Afghanistan was destroyed. The organisation was forced to go underground and radically change the operating model. Consequently, the 'new' Al-Qaeda was no longer based on centralised, elitist organisational structure but became a loose coalition of groups bonded by common ideological and doctrinal values as well as blind loyalty to Al-Qaeda's leadership. Furthermore, the Al-Qaeda's global success was a result of synergistic effects relating to the integration of dozens of independent Islamic groups from all corners of the world. The Islamic State seems to follow the same path given that its overseas provinces are quasi-independent but they continue to operate in accordance with the principles and the strategy of the Islamic State. Those groups also share a common history of the Islamic State understood as a territorial organisation; similar methods of operations; and finally competition with Al-Qaeda.

Direct rivalry between these two terrorist organisations is undoubtedly a major factor contributing to development of the Islamic State's structures in regions such as Levant, Yemen, West Africa, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Southeast Asia. Both groups are also involved in a race to increase their influence and gain supporters in those regions of the world where the radical Islam has had very little impact, for example in Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Niger), South Asia (Sri Lanka, Maldives), and Southeast Asia (Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand). Contrary to claims of some experts, this competition does not undermine the global jihadist movement; instead, it seems to stimulate it and rapidly extend the influence of radical Islam.

External Support

The Islamic State owes its position in the global jihadist movement to external financial support and patronage of non-state and possibly state actors. It seems very unlikely that the rise of the Islamic State, its sudden military successes that led to the establishment of the caliphate in 2014 as well as the caliphate's endurance despite military defeats in Levant were pure coincidence. The military conquest of the no-man's-land in Syria and Iraq whose territory was the size of the UK did not seem beyond the capability of irregular forces given the favourable circumstances that existed during the civil war. However, maintaining control over those lands and establishing an effective governance system over the course of time is a completely different matter. The Islamic State was able to smuggle tens of thousands of oil barrels per day to Turkey and operated a fleet of thousands new pickup trucks that were modified in Levant to serve military purposes. A short but turbulent history of the Islamic State's caliphate is full of mysteries giving a whole new perspective on events that took place in Iraq and Syria. In 2011, the discovery of Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, nearby the Pakistan Military Academy, raised questions about the role of the Pakistani government in sheltering the terrorist. A similar analogy could be drawn regarding the role of the Turkish government in sheltering the leader of the Islamic State. Al-Baghdadi was in hiding in Barisha, in the northern part of the Idlib province, several kilometres from the Turkish border, that has been under Turkish control since August 2016. The 25,000-strong Syrian National Army (SNA) which was organised, trained, and controlled by Ankara is not the only force operating in the region. Turkey has also a political and organisational control over other Sunni militant groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Tanzim Hurras al-Din; the latter is informally linked to Al-Qaeda and had been allegedly paid to protect the leader of the Islamic State. It is unclear, however, how the most wanted terrorist in the world managed to remain in hiding in northern Syria for several months given the activity of the Turkish intelligence and the military as well as their Syrian allies. Intriguingly, the U.S. administration decided to arrest (or rather eliminate) the leader of the Islamic State in late October 2019 despite that the American intelligence had been aware of al-Baghdadi's whereabouts since summer 2019. The sequence of events may suggest that the sudden operation in Barisha was an attempt to improve the image of the United States which was undermined by an

unexpected decision of Donald Trump to withdraw the U.S. forces from Syria and abandon Kurdish fighters in the face of Turkish offensive in northern provinces. Nonetheless, it is a rather puzzling situation that al-Baghdadi survived so long in the territory controlled by Turkey (a member state of NATO and the anti-terrorist coalition) and was able to buy protection of an organisation associated with Al-Qaeda, the greatest rival of the Islamic State. Another controversial issue is the alleged financial support of Tanzim Hurras al-Din by Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Some sources also indicate that Hurras al-Din is associated with Iraqi anti-government groups which were established by former members of Saddam Hussein's army.

Conclusions

1. The elimination of both Asim Umar (leader of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent) and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (head of the Islamic State) can be perceived as a successful implementation of decapitation strategy. This strategy is based on the presumption that Jihadist militant groups can be dismantled by selective elimination of their leadership. It remains questionable, however, whether those operations are actually effective. The strength of the Islamic radicalism is not rooted in leaders of numerous Jihadist groups but the ideological and religious influence of the movement in Muslim countries.
2. It is very unlikely that the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi will put an end to the Islamic State or even disrupt activities and operations of the caliphate, particularly in the West. It is worth noting that the elimination of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 has neither destroyed nor weakened Al-Qaeda.
3. Since 2017, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has played only a symbolic role for new generation of Jihadist groups which are more intransigent and aggressive than Al-Qaeda. The end of the 'territorial presence' of the Islamic State in Levant was the major reason why al-Baghdadi was no longer able to have real control over the caliphate. In this context, the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is also rather symbolic and therefore will have little practical impact on the remnants of the Islamic State.
4. Rapid succession after al-Baghdadi's death was supposed to prove the strength and effectiveness of the caliphate's decision-making capabilities. Nonetheless, the new caliph must face new reality in which the Islamic State is a federation of several independent

Islamic militant groups which have various organisational and geographical characteristics. In the near future it will turn out whether the leader of the Islamic State will be able to gain support of local warlords who are currently in charge of the caliphate's provinces across the world. It is possible, however, that emirs of the most influential provinces of the Islamic State (for example Khorasan, West Africa, and Yemen) will challenge al-Qurashi's position and the monopoly of Levantine Arabs in the Islamic State's leadership structures.

5. In spite of the organisational and structural challenges faced by the Islamic State, the caliphate will certainly become an ideological and political concept based on timeless principles no longer limited by its former territorial dimension. Therefore, the caliphate will remain immortal as long as there are religious fanatics willing to follow and implement caliphate's ideology even if it requires them to sacrifice their lives. Undoubtedly, the caliphate will not suffer from a lack of volunteers given that the idea of going back to the origins of Islam is still very attractive to many followers of this religion across the globe.

6. Currently, nothing can justify a thesis that the caliphate will collapse in the near future. The same can be said of a statement that a major breakthrough in war on terrorism has been achieved. In fact, the world faces a completely new reality in which a centralised caliphate ruled by one charismatic leader is being replaced by several smaller but still relatively strong caliphates. Today, former provinces of the caliphate are more autonomous centres of the jihadist movement that adhere to the legacy and traditions of the Islamic State but operate on their own. Therefore, the fight against the Islamic terrorism is entering a new phase and there is no chance it will end anytime soon given a number of countries interested in fuelling extremism.

Author: *Tomasz Otłowski, Senior Fellow, International Security and Defence Programme, Casimir Pulaski Foundation*

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