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## **The Elimination of al-Baghdadi from the Arena: A Limited Shockwave**

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**The death of caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is an important intelligence, operational, and moral achievement for the United States, as well as for its partners in the ongoing international campaign against global terrorist threats. However, the practical significance of this event is less than its symbolic significance. Indeed, the main challenge facing ISIS is far greater than the elimination of its leader, as the organization has struggled in recent months to survive physically and to maintain its position as the dominant organization on the global Salafi-jihadi stage. Thus the elimination of al-Baghdadi from the scene – as important and dramatic as it may seem – is far from heralding the downfall of ISIS or any significant reduction in the dangers posed by the organization, due to the capability attributed to it to recover and to launch terrorist attacks and guerilla warfare in the Levant and beyond. For Israel, the elimination of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi does not bear much significance. Nonetheless, and although the threat posed to Israel from ISIS inside its territory and at its borders is relatively small Israel should invest intelligence efforts in case the situation changes and for the benefit of its allies abroad.**

The death of caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi during a commando raid on his hiding place near the village of Barisha in Idlib province conducted on October 26, 2019 by United States special forces is an important intelligence, operational, and moral achievement for the United States, as well as for its partners in the ongoing international campaign against global terrorist threats. However, the practical significance of al-Baghdadi's death is less than its symbolic significance. The elimination of al-Baghdadi, mainly as an authoritative supreme religious figure of the Islamic State "camp" (rather than as an extraordinary military maverick) is challenging, particularly because the shrinking ISIS organization has struggled in recent months to survive physically. ISIS has also sought to maintain its position as the dominant organization in the global Salafi-jihadi stage against its competitors, al-Qaeda and its allies, and advance preparations to continue and even increase its local, regional, and global activities.

At its peak, the Islamic State's territorial conquests (*'tamkin'*) and successes supported al-Baghdadi's aspirations and pretensions to spread hope in the hearts of his followers that he would fulfill his promises to establish an Islamic caliphate. However, the military defeat that the Islamic State suffered led to its loss of control over extensive territories in

Syria and in Iraq, and this bitter reality forced him to try to convert his promises into immediate achievements. During his two last speeches, he called on his supporters to remain steadfast, to persist with the jihad, and to demonstrate their loyalty to the “path of God.” In the video broadcast in April 2019, it was obvious that the caliph’s charisma as the religious leader with supreme authority was already dimming, and he likewise failed to command the presence of a supreme military leader who could not be replaced.

The question of al-Baghdadi’s successor, debated extensively in the media, will mainly be decided by the organization’s surviving elite and include considerations about whether to appoint another caliph or to make do with appointing a “regular” leader. The importance of the move derives from the considerable significance attributed to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s controversial decision to crown himself as caliph. This decision sparked strong disagreements among leading clerics in the Salafi-jihadi movement and triggered a deep split between supporters and opponents. If the ISIS leadership appoints a new leader while dividing the role of military leader from the role of religious leader, without revisiting the question of the appointment of a caliph, then it will be able to fill al-Baghdadi’s shoes without much upheaval. Note that the killings of previous Islamic State leaders, in the various permutations of the organization, also did not cause any major shockwaves. Thus, when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, was killed in Iraq in 2006, Abu Ayyub al-Masri was appointed in his stead, and under its second reincarnation as the Islamic State in Iraq, it was under the command of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (no relation to Abu Bakr). The two were killed in 2010 and were replaced by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This kind of succession can be expected now too.

Therefore, the main challenge facing ISIS is far more substantial than the question of the elimination of its leader, even if he is a caliph. Al-Baghdadi was killed while the organization is in the midst of a battle over its modes of survival and operation, its preparations for the future, and its efforts to enhance its position and influence in the global jihadi movement. A related question concerns the ties between ISIS in the Levant and its partners throughout the world that swore a personal pledge of allegiance (*bay'ah*) to Baghdadi himself.

ISIS continues to commit terrorist attacks and guerilla operations in Syria and Iraq on a weekly basis. Although there has been a decline in the scale of its operations compared to previous years, a Pentagon report from July 2019 assesses that it has 14,000-18,000 combatants. Potential combat reinforcements may be added to these from among the ISIS members held in detention and camps for internally displaced controlled by the Kurds in northeastern Syria. There have already been reports about hundreds of ISIS combatants escaping from the detention camps controlled by the Kurds, who were forced to let them

go because they are fighting for their lives following President Trump's decision to withdraw the American forces from northern Syria.

ISIS partners throughout the world, in Afghanistan, Africa, Southeast Asia, and Caucasia, are continuing their terrorist activities under the symbolic umbrella of the Islamic State "camp." The extent of the Islamic State's control over them and the coordination between them was unclear in the past, and it remains to be seen how their relations will unfold in the future. Nevertheless, it appears that the continuing terrorist activities on the part of these forces and their efforts to advance the Salafi-jihadist ideology, whether under the code name Islamic State/ISIS or separately, or on behalf of the al-Qaeda "camp," will continue to pose a regional and global threat.

Another question addresses the possibility of al-Qaeda and ISIS – along with their allies – joining forces. The elimination of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was a critical precondition for such a consolidation, though not the only one. The loathing between the leaders al-Zawahiri and al-Baghdadi, as well as the animosity between their supporters, exceeded the personal and organizational dimensions during the competition over hegemony among loyalists of the Salafi-jihadi movement. The rivalry between them also went far beyond disputes about strategy and the "true" way in terms of religious law to realize their shared vision – to restore the crown of Islam to its proper place. Consequently, despite the removal of al-Baghdadi and, on the other hand, the prominent conciliatory stance of Ayman al-Zawahiri, who calls persistently for the unification of the Islamic nation, it appears that reconciliation between the camps is not on the agenda in the near future. Furthermore, it does not appear now that the Salafi-jihadist movement is facing any unprecedented emergency situation, such as an acute wide scale attack by the global coalition against it.

In conclusion, the elimination of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi from the scene – as important and dramatic as it may seem – is far from heralding the downfall of ISIS or any significant reduction in the dangers posed by the organization, due to the capability attributed to it to recover and to launch terrorist attacks and guerilla warfare in the Levant and beyond. ISIS and its partners throughout the world operating on its behalf will continue to carry out such actions, as they have done until now, prior to the elimination of the caliph. Retaliatory attacks, even if they are declared as dedicated to his memory, will primarily be an outcome of the operational capability of their combatants and, at the same time, will be dependent on the limits and failures of the security services to thwart them in time.

For Israel, the elimination of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi does not bear much significance. Nonetheless, and although the threat posed to Israel from ISIS inside its territory and at

its borders is relatively small and therefore low on its list of priorities, Israel should invest intelligence-collection efforts in case the situation changes, mainly in the context of the international arena, where targets associated with Israel might be attacked by ISIS and its global partners. Furthermore, Israel is morally obligated to continue such efforts, considering its relative advantage in terms of intelligence and operational capabilities (which also derive from its geographic proximity to the organization's core) and has already enabled Israel to help thwart numerous terrorist attacks against allies and partners in the context of global counterterrorism efforts. This intelligence can be expected to be in high demand in the future as well.