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Baghdadi's Gamble

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On November 7, 2014, coalition airplanes in northern Iraq fighting the Islamic State organization (ISIS) carried out an assassination attempt on ISIS leaders, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the organization's head. Although the attempt failed, it underscored that Baghdadi is a principal target of both external and domestic enemies. Baghdadi's actions over the last year and a half have made it clear that while assuming calculated risks, he is intent to stay his current course. Thus, he presumably weighs the pros and cons of his actions carefully, including his decision to appoint himself caliph and establish the Islamic State in parts of Iraq and Syria.

Baghdadi apparently feels that his self-appointed status as caliph gives him several advantages:

- a. **Status as leader of the jihadist camp, replacing Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda:** Baghdadi's announcement was partly a response to the threat to his status in the global jihadist camp resulting from the camp's internal rift, specifically the dispute between him and Zawahiri that emerged in the first half of 2013, when Baghdadi unilaterally announced the establishment of ISIS. This dispute reached a climax in February 2014 when Zawahiri publicly expelled ISIS from al-Qaeda's network of alliances.
- b. **Political and religious validity to the new framework:** The announcement helped Baghdadi leverage the successes of ISIS, which had already conquered large tracts of Syria and Iraq and wrested control of tremendous economic resources and a wealth of advanced weaponry and given him the confidence that he could announce the establishment of an Islamic state toward realization of the vision of a restored caliphate.
- c. **Legal and traditional authority:** Baghdadi stipulated that *hijra* (migration to Islamic land) and *ba'yah* (oath of allegiance) are obligations incumbent upon all Muslims. Being caliph gives Baghdadi's edicts and instructions the status of rulings that cannot be violated and turns his opponents into enemies of Islam, even if they are Muslims, and all the more so if they aren't.

- d. **Redress for the sense of humiliation, rage, and frustration among masses of Muslims and hope for a glorious future:** Baghdadi wants to make the Islamic State a lodestone for young Muslims looking for solidarity and a source for identity. For them, the Islamic State is supposed to fulfill the promise of a future Islamic empire that will serve as a source of pride and power for Muslims around the globe.

At the same time, by appointing himself caliph, Baghdadi incurred several serious drawbacks:

1. **His personal survival has become a source of weakness toward fulfillment of the vision:** Finding a replacement to Caliph Baghdadi will be no small matter. His unprecedented and controversial move has aroused widespread criticism on the part of many religious scholars of Islam who have vehemently rejected his self-appointment. It has even been said that his conduct is contrary to the values of Islam. Therefore, although in the past Salafist jihadist organizations were able to come up with acceptable replacements for assassinated leaders, the appointment of a new caliph with the authority and status meriting that lofty title and earning the approval of the religious establishment will be difficult.
2. **Many internal enemies:** Baghdadi has challenged the leadership of Zawahiri and other leaders of Salafist jihadist organizations, including senior partners in al-Qaeda's alliance, such as al-Qaeda in the Hijaz and Islamic Maghreb, the Somalian al-Shabaab, Jabhat al-Nusra, and organizations that identify with al-Qaeda and draw inspiration from Zawahiri. Baghdadi has thus aroused a coalition of some 126 prominent Islamic religious figures, including Muhmad al-Makdisi, Abu Katada, Siab'ee and others, who have called on him to recant his declaration as a step that does not befit Islamic religious law and arouses civil strife (*fitna*).
3. **Opposition from local populations seeking revenge:** The brutality of ISIS, which meets opposition on the part of defenseless locals who have fallen under the organization's control with force, cruel punishment, and a Robespierre-like reign of terror, has engendered a blood feud between local populations and the organization. In the Middle East, blood feuds play a significant role, and one day ISIS may be made to pay dearly for its conduct.
4. **An extensive international coalition against ISIS:** The public beheadings of Western journalists and aid workers have served ISIS's media strategy and recruitment campaign. For many Muslim youths, both Arab and Western, these acts communicate the might of the emerging Islamic empire and the West's impotence in confronting it. At the same time, these brutal actions aroused negative public opinion around the world, especially in the West. The public outrage has moved many national leaders to enlist in an international coalition to stop the emerging threat represented by the Islamic State. The coalition now

includes more than 60 nations involved to some degree or another in the campaign to stop ISIS.

In a video released shortly after the assassination attempt and intended to refute the rumor of his death, Baghdadi labored to inspire his followers. In his address, he promised success in his effort against the “crusade” being waged against the Islamic State and emphasized the importance of the personal participation of every Muslim in the battle as well as military jihad as sacred principles of Islam. He also stressed the weakness of the coalition partners, afraid of the achievements of ISIS and the anticipated restoration of the caliphate. Baghdadi warned of the false propaganda war the coalition is waging against ISIS’s successes in its attempt to deter new volunteers from joining the organization and swore that this war is doomed to failure.

Furthermore, Baghdadi mocked the coalition’s aversion to the use of ground forces in the campaign as a fear of defeat at the hands of fierce, brave Muslim fighters. Such rhetoric is a gamble because it reflects his preference that large international coalition forces enter the battlegrounds in Syria and Iraq. It seems that he prefers the risk of massive foreign intervention given his belief that a development in that direction – despite the clear danger it poses to the survival of the Islamic State – will serve to nurture the recruitment narrative of a religious war against a foreign invader to Muslim land. Baghdadi added that the Islamic State also intends to act against Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Algeria.

At this point it is too early to determine whether Baghdadi’s positive assessment of the balance of pros and cons of his moves is justified. While it is true that the Islamic State has managed to establish control over the locations it has conquered and attract tens of thousands of Muslim volunteers from all over the world, it also seems that the intervention of coalition forces, which are still in the early stages of activity, has already succeeded in stopping the rapid and successful spread of ISIS.

The evil wind blowing from ISIS is out in the open, and therefore a clear and present danger for all to see. To stop the movement, the world needs a broader, more aggressive, and more resolute international coalition to combine military, political, legal, and ideological steps against this common enemy.

Israel, which thus far does not figure at the top of the ISIS agenda, must view Baghdadi’s rhetoric against “the Judeo-crusader alliance,” and especially his explicit reference to the help Israel is extending to the coalition dedicated to his demise, as a warning of a possible change in the organization’s priorities. Israel must take into account the possibility that in the not too distant future the organization will act, directly or via its like-minded partners, against Israeli and Jewish targets in Israel and abroad.