



"The False Caliphate": ISIS Leadership Crisis

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At the end of April 2019, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS’ leader, appeared in a rare video after he has not been seen in public since June 2014. In the video al-Baghdadi wanted to convey the message that ISIS’ leadership operates as usual and directs its subordinate provinces in the “ordinary course of business”. Additionally, he wanted to refute any rumors and speculations regarding ISIS’ decline. That said, one may interpret al-Baghdadi’s appearance as a manifestation of distress and a reflection of the deep crisis ISIS leadership is facing, where high ranking clerics who are former members of that leadership are now trying to delegitimize the same leadership they served on. The reason for that delegitimization is a dispute with al-Baghdadi regarding an indiscriminate killing of Muslims, eliminating opposing voices within ISIS and the sorry state of the organization in terms of desertions, loss of territories etc.

Abu Muhamad Al Hashemi, a senior qadi and a former member ISIS’ “office of research and fatwas” (and apparently a distant cousin of al-Baghdadi) has emerged as one of al-Baghdadi’s fiercest critics. In a book published in March 2019 he described an egocentric and estranged leadership guided by its own self-serving interests, alienated from its members and one that has no qualms sacrificing them to fortify its position and promote those self-serving interests. Therefore, al-Baghdadi needs to be removed from office, replaced by another leader and even executed. This document purports to examine Al Hashemi’s criticism of al-Baghdadi’s leadership and its ramifications.

Since its inception in 2014 ISIS has been exposed to harsh criticism regarding its brutality and extreme interpretation of Islamic scripture. This criticism has been voiced by various institutions around the Islamic world, such as al-Azhar in Egypt, that clarified that ISIS is an illegitimate entity and an organization that does not represent authentic Islam but rather manifest a warped and distorted version of Islam. In September 2014, 126 leading Islamic clerics published a letter (dubbed “The Open Letter”) addressed to al-Baghdadi where they explained why ISIS does not operate according to Islam and why the latter distorts it¹. The various Jihad organizations led by Al Qaeda and the Afghani Taliban, chimed in and blamed ISIS leadership for distorting the true meaning of Jihad and harming the fight against the crusading enemy.²

Criticism on ISIS’ way was heard inside the organization as well. An internal argument between two schools of thought within ISIS regarding the use of Takfir (i.e. declaring a Muslim as an infidel and thereby exposing

¹ <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/pdf/Booklet-Arabic.pdf>

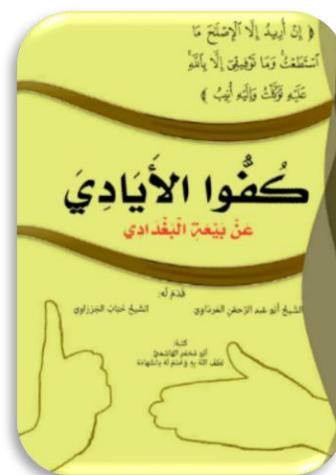
² Lizzie Dearden, “Al-Qaeda Leader Denounces Isis ‘Madness and Lies’ as Who Terrorist Groups Compete for Dominance”, **Independent**, 3 January 2017.

them to potential violence) was exposed in 2017. The first, named “Al Binalia” after the scholar **Abu Hammam al-Turki al-Binali** (1984-2017)³ wanted to limit the use of Takfir and prudently apply it. The other, more extreme in its approach, named “Al-Hazamia” after the **Sheikh Ahmad al-Hazami** (imprisoned in KSA since 2005)⁴. Even Al Hashemi himself addressed the Takfir issue and cautioned al-Baghdadi, in a letter from 2017 called “the Hashemite Advice to the Leader of the Islamic State”, to use it sparingly. Al Hashemi stressed that a liberal use of Takfir manifests a wrongful trend that deviates from Islam and will likely harm ISIS, therefore it needs to be curbed⁵. Eventually, Al Hashemi left ISIS in October 2017 over a disagreement with al-Baghdadi’s policy.

Further, the strong sentiment against al-Baghdadi surfaced in January 2019. According to the British Guardian his bodyguards thwarted an attempted coup that was carried out by foreign fighters in eastern Syria. According to western intelligence sources, Al Hashemi was the mind behind the failed coup⁶.

“Go Back on Your Pledge of Allegiance to al-Baghdadi”

In March 2019 Al Hashemi kept attacking al-Baghdadi, this time in a book titled “Go Back on Your Pledge of Allegiance to al-Baghdadi” (231 pages)⁷. The book is a fierce indictment against al-Baghdadi’s policy and explains, while using Islamic scriptures why al-Baghdadi lost his legitimacy as a leader and why he needs to be removed. The book’s forward was written by two Islamic scholars: **Sheikh Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Mardawi**⁸ and **Sheikh Khabab al-Jazrawi**⁹. Al Mardawi commented that in the beginning al-Baghdadi was loyal to Islam and Jihad but over time lost his way and his behavior was typified by violating Sharia law and by committing multiple crimes such as murder, degradation and incarceration of scholars. Al-Jazrawi commended all the Muslims that chose to join al-Baghdadi at the inception of ISIS believing he will follow in the footsteps of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, former AQ leader in Iraq, and implement Jihad in accordance with Sharia, but alas, al-Baghdadi distorted Sharia, spewed nonsense and defamed prominent Jihad leaders such as Osama Bin Laden. Al-Jazrawi said that he consulted many members of ISIS and they all concluded that ISIS’ leadership has lost its way because of Takfir. Both al-Mardawi and al-Jazrawi said that in light of the above al-Baghdadi was no longer worthy of ruling as the Caliph and no one should



³ One of ISIS’ leading scholars. A- Binali (of Bahraini descent) was an avid supporter of al-Baghdadi but later turned away from him due to disagreement on the Takfir. Was in killed in a coalition aerial strike in Syria in 2017.

⁴ For expansion on the Takfir debate see Cole Bunzel, "Caliphate in Disarray: Theological Turmoil in the Islamic State", *Jihadica*, October 3, 2017. <http://www.jihadica.com/caliphate-in-disarray/>

⁵ 17.2.2018. <https://alabasirah.com/node/731>

⁶ 17.2.2018. <https://alabasirah.com/node/731>

⁷ The title is similar to the title of al-Binali’s book “Reach Out to Pledge Your Allegiance to al-Baghdadi”. Al-Hashemi made a point of noting that his book was not a response to al-Binali’s book but rather his book complements al-Binali’s.

⁸ Senior scholar and a former ISIS member

⁹ Fought in several theatres, including Iraq and Syria until his injury. Within ISIS, oversaw teaching Sharia to Jihadists.

swear allegiance to him. Al-Jazrawi even went as far as saying “I command my brothers in other provinces to follow the ruling of the Sheikh [i.e. the author] that says that Ibn Awad (i.e. al-Baghdadi) should be removed, all allegiance to him terminated and that a new leader should be elected, one that will follow Quran”¹⁰.

In the preamble al-Hashemi expressed his appreciation to the soldiers of the Islamic state for their tenacity and willingness to fight for Allah and apply his laws and to their stellar success to conquer many territories in Iraq and Syria within a short time frame. Per his opinion ISIS’ soldiers can claim the following achievements:

1. The Revival of the Islamic Caliphate notion in the hearts of Muslims, even though its practical application failed.
2. Attracting Muslims globally to Jihad arenas to assist Islam, Sharia, Shia, Suna.
3. Eliminating the Sykes-Picot artificial borders.
4. Renouncing the “Dollar Idols”, i.e. abandoning the use of foreign currency and returning to the original Islamic gold and silver coins.
5. Revival of the custom to capture infidel women.
6. Spreading the faith in one god.
7. Release of thousands of prisoners from Iraqi and Syrian prisons.
8. Revival of Islamic philosophy and law.

That said, al-Hashemi claimed that al-Baghdadi hurt these achievements and bears the responsibility for the downfall of ISIS. He explained that the members swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi because they believed he would follow in the footsteps of “forefathers” (Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hassan al-Muhajir the former leader of the al-Qaeda extension in Iraq) who were inspired by Osama Bin Laden. But, once al-Baghdadi was appointed Caliph the organization’s way got distorted and it became corrupt. Moreover, its leadership lied and claimed it had established a Caliphate based on Muhammad’s way when in fact it followed a distorted interpretation of Islam and extremely overused Takfir. For example, the leadership executed dozens of Tunisian foreign fighters just because their thinking didn’t agree with the leadership’s.

Al Hashemi mentions **nine major reasons explaining why al-Baghdadi’s rule is illegitimate** and therefore he needs to be instantly deposed:

1. **Al-Baghdadi’s regime fleeces its subjects.** The pledge of allegiance to the leader is supposed to be based on the recognition and trust that the leader will uphold Sharia law and act to instill justice. However, an unjust ruler that fleeces his people is not worthy of a pledge of allegiance. Al-Hashemi blamed al-Baghdadi for ordering the execution of operatives who deserted from ISIS and left the

¹⁰ Al-Mardawi said that the Caliph should have a spectrum of qualities such as nobility, courage, calm temper, knowledge etc., qualities that al-Baghdadi lacks. Al-Jazrawi blamed the leadership for ignoring members’ advice and instead of examining its veracity focused on defaming and demonizing the critics.

battlefield and for ordering the execution of scholars whose approach wasn't aligned with ISIS'. Per Al, Hashemi, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani the former ISIS spokesman, ordered the incarceration and execution of scholars such as Sheikh al-Jazrawi on false accusations of alliance formation with the Kurdish PKK, disobeying orders, retreat from the battle in Manbij and for being a "Murtadin" (a term describing a lapse Muslim). Al Hashemi said that Sheikh al-Baraa, an ISIS cleric, went into hiding because of these false accusations but turned himself in when he was promised that no harm will come to him. Despite the above he was thrown to jail and per Al Hashemi this has been discovered only a few weeks later when Shiite militia broke into the jail and freed al-Baraa.

2. **The Leadership lost its way.** Per al-Hashemi, ISIS leadership camouflages itself with a religious façade to gain religious legitimacy but in fact it is a ruse and a politization of Islam. He stressed that a good Muslim leadership is typified by leading a jihad and by protecting the weak and none of this is found within ISIS leadership. Instead of being good Muslim leaders, al-Baghdadi and his cronies shamefully used the local population and enjoyed the loot and their prisoners. He even mocked al-Baghdadi and said that he has never seen battle and fled Mosul before the Shiite military forces arrived. "If he was a man then he would have fought like men... and women do. He wouldn't have hide in a hole like a beetle [...]. they sit like women and mice in their hiding places¹¹. Al-Hashemi cautioned that considering the above al-Baghdadi is a symbol for failed leadership and its outcome, infringement of Muslim rights, looting and dividing the spoils of battle only among the leadership members, indiscriminate killing of Christians and Muslims, fleeing, incarceration, murder, humiliation of scholars, dissemination of illiteracy etc. Further, al-Hashemi, was infuriated in light of ISIS resistance to nurture and develop the scholars that the rank and file members of ISIS love and cherish. Instead, per AL Hashemi, ISIS leadership chooses to weaken them and even eliminate them if they feel threatened by them. The Leadership did that by defaming them (saying that they allowed polytheism) and by sending them to battles the leadership knew they would be killed at. Per al-Hashemi, this trend led to the death (by airstrikes) of thirty to forty clerics a week in al-Baraka province in Syria.
3. **The pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi is invalid when the leadership denounces its followers.** Per al-Hashemi, al-Baghdadi commits a grave sin in his demeanor towards his followers and towards Sunna. He compared the ruthlessness of the ISIS internal security apparatus to those of the Gestapo, the Stalinist regime, the Al Nasser regime in Egypt and others. Here too, al-Hashemi repeated what he said about the various crimes committed against ISIS members such as incarceration and murder of foreign fighters; denying loot from fighters, destruction of Quran studies institutes etc. all in order to prevent the rise of elements within ISIS that would compete with the leadership. Al-Hashemi mentioned that some ISIS fighters approached Sheikh Abu Nasser al-Shamri (a Kuwaiti religious scholar who was sentenced to 30 years in jail for ISIS support charges) to get a religious ruling regarding the pledge of allegiance to al-

¹¹ Ibid, p.81.

Baghdadi. Based on the above, Al-Shamri ruled that the pledge of allegiance is null and void and the fighters are no longer required to fight for al-Baghdadi but rather take care of their own well-being first and foremost.

4. **Straying from the righteous path.** Al-Hashemi blamed al-Baghdadi for creating a new religion and forcefully enforcing it at gun point. He explained that this religion is characterized by obscene novelties, by getting Muslims killed through dissemination of false accusations of heresy and polytheism, by making it difficult for clerics to spread the true Islam etc. For example, al-Hashemi said that al-Baghdadi ordered the incarceration of every fighter who refused to pledge his allegiance to him or wished to leave ISIS. Per al-Hashemi, medieval scholars justified launching a rebellion against a leader that encourages heresy and novelties that are not in line with Islam. For example, He quoted **Abu Abbas al-Qurtubi** (1182-1258), a scholar from the Maliki school of thought who had justified launching a rebellion against a ruler in case the ruler forsakes religious rules and customs such as prayer, Ramadan fast, imposing the lord's punishments or in case the ruler reverses prohibitions such as drinking and fornication. "If he set a new custom [that contradicts Islam] and called upon the people to adopt it then the public should renounce him". The Granada Qadi, **Iyadh al-Qurtubi** (1083-1149) was quoted as saying that "there is no dispute that an infidel is not supposed to lead, and his tenure should not be expended if he has forsaken prayer or among his followers obscene novelties are prevalent...if such a thing happens, i.e. a ruler displaying signs of heresy [...] then he is no longer qualified to be a ruler and none should obey him. The people's duty is to rebel against him, renounce him and appoint a just ruler, as much as possible, in his stead¹². Al Hashemi stressed that al-Baghdadi fits the above description and therefore neither qualified nor worthy to serve as the Caliph.
5. **Al-Baghdadi and his cronies do not rule according to Sharia law.** Instead of conducting just legal proceedings according to Sharia law al-Baghdadi rushes to execute defendants without a trial. For example, he ordered the execution of a woman without a trial however at the end it was found out that she was the wife of the vice governor of ISIS' Baghdad province.
6. **Dishonoring Muslim women by failing to secure their departure from Mosul.** Al-Hashemi blamed ISIS for failing to prepare to the enemy's planned invasion to Mosul¹³. Per al-Hashemi, ISIS had nine months to plan and prepare for the siege on the city, yet the organization failed to build tunnels and fortifications a more than that failed to let Mujahidin families leave town, except family members of the leadership who have left town through secret escape routes carrying loads of gold and money. He exposed that some families paid thousands of dollars to be smuggled out of the Kurdish areas in northern Mosul to Erbil and Baghdad. The wives of poor families had to stay behind and suffer oppression, incarceration and death when the Shiite forces invaded the city. He blamed al-Baghdadi for criminally neglecting the

¹² Ibid, p. 105.

¹³ For example, he blamed Abu Hamza al-Kurdi, a senior ISIS military commander, as one of the contributors to the defeat because he harshly treated the Jihadists, shortened their preparation time and sent them unprepared to battle, resulting in hundreds of them death (There, P. 130)

Iraqi widows taken as prisoners by the Shiite and for the Shiite dishonoring them. He also criticized the leadership for not letting Mujahidin families leave Mosul and explained that the leadership's motive was their wishes to make sure the people will fight, while at the same time the first one to leave Mosul, six months prior to the Shiite forces' arrival, was al-Baghdadi himself.

7. **Wrong interpretations contradicting Ijma (consensus) and Allah's laws.** Per al Hashemi, al-Baghdadi promulgated questionable laws that allowed him for instance to abolish the division of spoils of war among the fighters. For example, when Sinjar was conquered, the leadership received Yazidi slaves when the 500 fighters got none. The same happened when Palmira (Syria) was conquered. Similarly, the oil revenue lined only the leadership's pockets. Al Hashemi said that when al-Baghdadi and his cronies fled Al-Mayadeen in Syria they left 100 Kilos of gold behind. One of the senior members ISIS went back to pick the gold but not the wives of Jihad operatives left behind. Al Hashemi stressed that there are many Hadiths that clarify that whomever infringes on a Jihadist's right to the spoils of war is considered an enemy of Allah. Al-Hashemi also blamed al-Baghdadi for promulgating laws that outright contradict Sharia, such as incarcerating any operative attempting to leave and desert ISIS and his execution in case this was the operative's second attempt at deserting; execution of smugglers trying to smuggle civilians out of war zones; execution of Muslims following confessions extracted through harsh torture etc.
8. **Eliminating the true Shura.** Per al-Hashemi, al-Baghdadi not only didn't have a Shura council but in fact resisted everyone who tried to advise him. Al-Baghdadi and his cronies adopted resolutions on religious issues without consulting a Shura council. According to old scholars, a ruler loses his legitimacy if he doesn't consult a Shura council. For example, the leadership allowed the use of interest (which is forbidden in Islam) when it wanted to mint gold and silver coins that were sold for different prices in Iraq and in Syria¹⁴. Another case was connected to al-Baghdadi and cronies' decision to use chemical weapons to bomb rebel forces in the city of Ma'ra (near Aleppo) while scores of Muslim civilians were in the vicinity. In another case, a religious permission was given to Philippine Mujahidin to levy a ransom on the entire city of Marwi even though it had a Muslim majority.
9. **Al-Baghdadi is making his own decisions but rather his cronies do.** Per al-Hashemi, al-Baghdadi is a Caliph only in name and doesn't make any decision which attests to a weak personality.

In light of the above, al-Hashemi justified a rebelling against a ruler that acts in a manner that contradicts Sharia, dishonors Muslims and murders many of them. He quoted Umar II (681-720), an Umayyad dynasty Caliph and a devout Muslim that stressed that one should obey a ruler that follows Allah not one who disobeys him. He added that in the first centuries of Islam, fifty scholars ruled that it is was lawful to rebel against a despot and anyone killed in such a rebellion is considered a shahid. By doing so al-Hashemi doubted the Hadith ruling that one should not rebel against a ruler even if said ruler is a despot. He also questioned the veracity of certain Islamic traditions considered as reliable and included in the canonic Hadith literature.

¹⁴ Indeed, al-Hashemi justifies the use of Islamic currency but criticizes the way it was minted which was not according to Sharia

For example, al-Hashemi a tradition included Sahih Muslim, one of the canonic Hadith collections in Islam, according to which, Muhammad ordered to obey a despot and forbade drawing a sword against him even if the despot didn't pray and even if the animosity towards him was strong. Per al-Hashemi the chain of tellers (Sanad) was unreliable as their identities wasn't known and therefore this was an unreliable Hadith. Al-Hashemi went even further and disputed a series of Hadiths forbidding a withdrawal of a pledge of allegiance and cautioning that a person doing so is punishable by death.

At the end of his book al-Hashemi requested that al-Baghdadi to resign in a manner that will prevent Muslim bloodshed. Similarly, he called ISIS troops to act swiftly and remove al-Baghdadi and his cronies and do that by taking control of the food depots, armories and money. He recommended to appoint another leader and pledge allegiance to him only if there is a consensus regarding his good qualities, courage and knowledge of Allah's laws, even if said leader is not from the Quraysh tribe (Muhammad's tribe). Per al-Hashemi this would be a pledge of allegiance to an Emir and not a Caliph and it is imperative that a Shura council will be established next to him. He also said that those who cannot depose of al-Baghdadi should at least revoke their pledge of allegiance and take caution before they take it again.

Further, al-Hashemi sent a message to ISIS troops outside of Syria and Iraq (Yemen, Egypt, Philippines) and urged them carry on with the Jihad but at the same time renounce al-Baghdadi. He called upon social media activists to continue assisting Jihad but not assist those who allow bloodshed and dishonor. Further, al-Hashemi called upon all foreign fighters to continue their Jihad and kill heretics but prudently and only if there is proof. Lastly, he called for unity among ISIS ranks and among ISIS and other Jihadi organizations who are not heretics. Per him, most of ISIS activists are good god-fearing Muslims but the leadership is the bad apple that corrupts the organization and causes civil war and it needs to be deposed.



The False Caliphate

Abu Isa al-Masri, a former preacher for ISIS is one of the most vocal voices challenging al- Baghdadi. Towards the end of April 2019, he published a booklet named **“The False Caliphate”** where he said that al-Baghdadi is not a real leader but a fictional character existing only in a virtual world. He blamed al-Baghdadi's followers that they tried to misrepresent that al-Baghdadi guides the Muslims from behind the scenes and that he avoids having his picture taken in public for security reasons. In his view al-Baghdadi became a symbol and virtual character without anyone knowing if he is alive. He even complained how disputes among ISIS members are being resolved: instead of disputes being argued in a Sharia court they are being settled over WhatsApp messages without reasoning or the possibility of appeal. Moreover, those who refuse to debate

religious issues on social media is risking being indicted. Al-Masri clarifies that in light of the above the pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi is illegitimate since the leader is fictitious and illegitimate¹⁵.

Summary

The challenge to al-Baghdadi posed by former high-ranking members of ISIS signifies a reduction of his political base. It is therefore, safe to assume that his public appearance at the end of April 2019 was not coincidental. The series of terror attacks carried out against hotels and churches in Sri Lanka on April 21st, 2019 played into al-Baghdadi's hands and may have hastened the timing of his public appearance. The wide media coverage of the attacks, the large number of casualties and foreigners, the complexity of the attacks and the attackers pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi assisted him to prove that he still attracting Jihadists worldwide and that his leadership is legitimate despite the challenging voices. It is also reasonable to assume that strategic attacks are to be expected as al-Baghdadi would want to solidify ISIS as a major player in the Jihadi arena.

If al-Baghdadi will be deposed ISIS may change. This change may be manifested through cautious use and more strict interpretation of Takfir, acting to cooperate with other Jihadi organizations and perhaps even temporary suspension of the Caliphate in light the fierce antagonism it provokes in many other Jihadi elements.

¹⁵ 1.5.2019. <https://www.aman-dostor.org/20888>

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