



A PORTRAIT OF CALIPH IBRAHIM

Is the Islamic State's Leader a Dangerous Megalomaniac?
The Jury Is Still Out in the Arab World

By Abdel Bari Atwan

Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi has been extremely successful in maintaining a high degree of anonymity and secrecy. He achieved this first in his role as leader of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) from 2010 and now as the emir and caliph of Islamic State (IS)¹ as he declared it on July 4, 2014. He rarely appears in public. Until recently he made few public statements, whether in writing, audio recordings, or videos. This is largely a consequence of advice from his security staff, who is well aware that any kind of public profile might present foreign intelligence with leads as to his whereabouts. It was a careless, boastful video, shot in the desert, that led American assassins to Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi in 2006.

However, I have been able to piece together an idea of the man through interviews—including speaking to a valuable source who is very close to the IS leadership and was in prison with Al-Baghdadi for two years—and various Arabic online sources. What follows is therefore a mosaic, and many fragments are, for the moment, missing. However, when assembled, this information paints a striking portrait of the world's most dangerous man.

Personal Life

Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, also known as Abu Duaa, Doctor Ibrahim, Awwad Ibrahim, Al-Shabah (the phantom), and “the invisible sheikh” (due to his habit of wearing a mask when addressing his commanders), was born in 1971 in Samarra, fifty miles north of Baghdad. His real name is Ibrahim Bin Awwad Bin Ibrahim Al-Badri Al-Qurayshi. He is from the Bobadri tribe, largely located in Samarra and Diyala, which includes the Radhawiyah, Husseiniyyah, and Adnaniyyah tribes, as well as, crucially, the Prophet Mohammed's Quraysh tribe. One of the key

◀ Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi preaching during Friday prayers at the Grand Mosque, Mosul, July 4, 2014.
Al-Furqan Media/Anadolu Agency

qualifications, historically, for becoming caliph is to be a descendant of the Prophet. Commentators have pointed out that Al-Baghdadi used a *miswak* (cleaning twig) to clean his teeth before delivering his famous sermon at the Great Mosque of Al-Nuri in Mosul on July 4, 2014, declaring the caliphate. In this he was emulating the Prophet Mohammed's reported practice. Thus he was linking himself through word, gesture, and blood lineage to the Prophet, as well as referencing the Salafist desire to return to the lifestyle of the first Muslims.

According to a biography posted online by the Islamic State's Al-Hayat Media Center and widely circulated among jihadist websites, Al-Baghdadi is from a religious family that includes several imams and Quranic teachers. His mother is from a distinguished family within the Bobadri tribe. He attended the Islamic University of Baghdad, receiving a BA, MA, and PhD. His doctorate focused on Islamic jurisprudence and Islamic culture and history. His religious credentials are taken to confer legitimacy on his claim to be not only a military and political leader but also a religious guide. This is something even Osama Bin Laden could not lay claim to. Both Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda's current leader, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, had more secular professional backgrounds. Bin Laden was involved in the construction industry, while Al-Zawahiri was a surgeon.

People who have met Al-Baghdadi describe him as quietly spoken and serious. A contact close to the IS leadership, whom I cannot identify for security reasons, was imprisoned with Al-Baghdadi in the U.S. detention center Camp Bucca, Iraq, for around two years from 2004. He said Al-Baghdadi always had a serene smile on his face and was "calm and self-possessed." This person, who had also been in Osama Bin Laden's coterie, said that Al-Baghdadi reminded him of the late Al-Qaeda leader. The same source told me that Al-Baghdadi is extremely charismatic and that, sitting in a room with him and listening to him talking, "it is very difficult not to be influenced by him, his ideas, and his beliefs."

Al-Baghdadi can also be ruthless and menacing. My contact told me that when Al-Baghdadi was released from prison, he told the American guard at the gates that he would be seeing him again. "We will find you on the streets somewhere, someday," he threatened, "either here or in New York." Enemies are not forgiven or forgotten by this quiet leader: after Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi was assassinated in 2010, two of the eleven members of the Shura Council convened to choose a new emir did not approve the choice of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. One of them, Jamal Al-Hamdani, was murdered shortly afterward.

As a military leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi is shrewd and calculating. Though he has never fought abroad—unusual in a global jihadist leader—he has extensive battle-ground experience. He is an intelligent opponent too, having carefully evaluated and

analyzed the experiences of “successful” longstanding jihadist organizations like the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. He recognizes the effectiveness of *hijra* (flight); he will immediately order full withdrawal from a battle that cannot easily be won, concluding that *hijra* is key to the survival of Al-Qaeda affiliates from Somalia to China.

Al-Baghdadi understands the value of a well-run organization. Like the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in its late 1990s heyday in Afghanistan, under Al-Baghdadi, ISI and then IS have adopted a complex, hierarchical, administrative, and decision-making structure, with departments and committees for everything from kidnapping to salaries and propaganda.

Comparisons with Osama Bin Laden are inevitable and frequent. Al-Baghdadi is held in as much esteem as Bin Laden was among Sunni fighters for his prowess as a military and religious leader; this is something Al-Zawahiri has not been able to achieve. Al-Baghdadi did not embark on his journey to the leadership with the benefit of wealth, like Osama Bin Laden. His progress has been due to his reputation alone, which appears to have won him praise and loyalty among the extremists. He has claimed that he, rather than Al-Qaeda’s present leader, is the true successor to Bin Laden’s legacy and the person most likely to fulfill his agenda. A Syrian fighter with IS once said, “Sheikh Al-Baghdadi and Sheikh Osama are similar. They always look ahead, they both seek an Islamic state.” Speaking to the same reporter, a non-Syrian fighter added, “The group Al-Qaeda does not exist anymore. It was formed as a base for the Islamic State and now we have it, Al-Zawahiri should pledge allegiance to Sheikh Al-Baghdadi.”

The indications are that Al-Baghdadi has, or has had, two or three wives. He first married when he finished his PhD, and his first son was born in 2003. According to the Iraqi Interior Ministry, his first wife is called Israa Rajab Mahal Al-Qaisi. He married Saja Hamid Al-Dulaimi in 2010 or 2011. Saja’s former husband was jihadist commander Fallah Ismail Jassem, of the Iraqi insurgency Jaish Al-Rashideen (Army of the Guides). He was gunned down by the Iraqi army in the province of Anbar in 2010, according to media reports. Saja is from an extremist family whose members all adhere to Salafist-jihadist ideology. Her father was a commander in the Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS), killed in battle with the Syrian Army in September 2013. It has also been reported that her sister, Duaa, carried out a suicide attack on a Kurdish gathering in Erbil, and her brother is reportedly facing execution for a series of bombings in southern Iraq.

The Al-Dulaimi tribe, from which Saja hails, is one of the largest tribes in the Arab World, with over seven million members. This is of immense significance in a country where tribal networks are a dominant sociopolitical factor; the U.S.-orchestrated Awakening campaign, which began in 2006, saw a significant (if temporary) reversal of

fortune for Al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers (Iraq), when tribal leaders were persuaded to turn against the jihadists. Jihadist leaders have a tradition of making political marriages to ensure tribal support. Osama Bin Laden's fifth wife, for example, was a young Yemeni woman from Taiz: Amal Al-Sadah. Taiz is Yemen's second largest city and, by marrying Amal, Bin Laden secured the protection of her tribe for Al-Qaeda members migrating to Yemen. According to the Iraqi Interior Ministry, Al-Baghdadi married another Al-Dulaimi, Asma Fawzi Muhammad, sometime in the 2010s. It is not known if this marriage has endured. The Al-Dulaimi connection, along with Al-Baghdadi's own extensive tribal network, may ensure greater loyalty and protection.

Saja's identity was revealed when she was photographed during an exchange of prisoners. At some time in 2014 the Al-Qaeda group Al-Nusra kidnapped a group of Syrian nuns in the town of Maaloulah. They were subsequently swapped in a deal with the Damascus regime. Among the female prisoners released by Bashar Al-Assad's government was Saja. Abu Maan Al-Suri, an Al-Nusra member, told reporters that Al-Baghdadi's wife had been imprisoned along with her two sons and a younger brother. In November 2014, Saja was arrested crossing into Lebanon with two sons and a daughter, the latter, Al-Baghdadi's child. According to a source interviewed by the *New York Times*, Lebanese, Iraqi, Syrian, and American intelligence coordinated in Saja's capture, in the belief that she will have a lot of valuable information. The Lebanese government also sees members of Al-Baghdadi's family as useful bargaining tools should any of their nationals be seized by Islamic State.

A large amount of rumor and disinformation designed to paint Saja as a less high-value prisoner has followed her detention, including the suggestion that her marriage to Al-Baghdadi lasted only three months and that she is now married to a Palestinian by whom she is pregnant. Saja and her 10-year-old daughter have remained remarkably tight-lipped about their relationship with Al-Baghdadi; at one point Saja told interrogators that her husband was dead. The real status of Saja's marriage to Al-Baghdadi is unlikely to be revealed by her. In any case, her position is now compromised—the same *New York Times* article quotes an American intelligence officer who captured one of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi's wives in Iraq: "We got little out of her . . . and when we sent her back, Zarqawi killed her." Saja's high status among the jihadi brides suggests that she is far from ostracized by her husband or his close associates. This situation would be unlikely if the couple were divorced—and the idea that she would have absconded for another man is simply ridiculous.

Becoming Radicalized

In the 1990s, Al-Baghdadi lived at the mosque in Tobchi, an impoverished suburb in east Baghdad. Locals recall him arriving; they say the young man was quiet and polite.

He gained his first experience as a preacher at the small mosque, taking prayers and the occasional sermon when the imam was away.

Like Osama Bin Laden, Al-Baghdadi enjoys sport. In Bin Laden's case, this was basketball; Al-Baghdadi loves football, according to *Daily Telegraph* interviews with his contemporaries. By some accounts he was an impressive striker. It was not all fun and games, though. Tobchi locals remember him espousing fundamentalist values, losing his temper when he saw men and women dancing together at a wedding, and, finally, falling out with the mosque when its owner became associated with the political Islamic Party—his extremist ideology held that political parties are sacrilegious. The mosque owner's tribal allegiances worked to squeeze Al-Baghdadi out, and he began preaching at the Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal Mosque in Samarra, which was frequented by several hardliners. It was around this time that he began to be known as Sheikh Ibrahim, the most common name for him in jihadist circles before he became Caliph Ibrahim.

Al-Baghdadi moved to a small town called Qaim, in Anbar province, following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Angered by the invasion of his country by foreign soldiers, he adopted the pseudonym Abu Duaa and became part of an insurgent extremist group, probably under the umbrella of Jaish Ansar Al-Sunna (Army of the Followers of the Teachings). It seems highly likely that it was here he became associated with Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi and his group Al-Tawhid wal Jihad (Monotheism and Jihad), which was also based in Anbar province. However, it is known that he did not at this point offer any form of allegiance to Al-Zarqawi.

In late 2004, he was arrested for “militant activities” and imprisoned without trial by the Americans in their Camp Bucca prison, deep in the desert. It was here that my source first met him, having been interrogated in Abu Ghraib prison first and then sent on to Bucca—a process my contact says was normal American practice at the time. If he was not entirely radicalized before prison, Al-Baghdadi certainly became so during his incarceration, where he met many Al-Qaeda men. As a Quranic teacher, Al-Baghdadi gave classes and lectures to many prominent Iraqi and foreign extremists in Camp Bucca.

He was released in 2006, according to my source—conflicting accounts, including official U.S. intelligence reports, have him in jail until 2009, but this is not possible given the chronology below. He co-founded a new extremist group called Jaish Ahl Al-Sunna wal Jamaa (Assembly of the Helpers of Sunna), which was active in the areas around and including Diyala, Baghdad, and Samarra, where he was a regular preacher in the mosque. Al-Baghdadi was the head of the sharia committee of Jaish Ahl Al-Sunna wal Jamaa.

He was close to some leaders of Al-Qaeda in Iraq but did not give his *bayat* (allegiance) to Al-Zarqawi or his successor, Abu Hamza Al-Muhajir. Al-Baghdadi liked

and greatly respected the latter; he described him to my source as “a wise leader” because he sought to avoid conflict between the various jihadist groups then fighting in Iraq. It was Abu Hamza who persuaded the Jordanian Al-Zarqawi to give his *bayat* to Osama Bin Laden and who took his oath of allegiance on behalf of the Al-Qaeda leader. Abu Hamza then gave a special kind of *bayat* to Al-Zarqawi, whereby he pledged loyalty to him as a military, rather than a spiritual or religious, leader.

When Al-Zarqawi was killed in 2006, Al-Baghdadi brought his group under the Majlis Shura Council (MSC) umbrella, at Abu Hamza’s invitation. The MSC incorporated Al-Qaeda and would soon be repackaged as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Al-Baghdadi was on the sharia committee and the central advisory (Shura Council) of the MSC. When ISI was inaugurated it was considered necessary to have a native Iraqi leader, because local people, as well as indigenous insurgents, were becoming indignant about the large numbers of foreign jihadists mustering in their country. The first indigenous leader went by the *kunya* (honorific) Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi; he was from the same Qurayshi tribe as Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, and Al-Baghdadi gave him his *bayat*. Abu Hamza Al-Muhajir—a non-Iraqi—was made the chief representative of the foreign jihadists on the consultative Shura Council. Al-Muhajir and Al-Baghdadi had a close relationship based on mutual respect. Al-Muhajir recommended that Al-Baghdadi, who was by then already the general supervisor of the ISI’s sharia committee, be promoted to deputy leader of ISI.

When Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi was killed in a U.S. air strike in 2010, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi was chosen as the group’s emir by the Shura Council, meeting in Ninevah in northern Iraq. Even though there were older, more experienced jihadists also under consideration, nine of the eleven men on the council decided in Al-Baghdadi’s favor. In little more than a decade he had gone from quiet, pious obscurity to becoming the leader of one of the most feared terror groups in history. Yet those who know him affirm that he has always disliked the limelight and would never have pushed himself forward as a leader.

Bold Leadership

Like all successful leaders, Al-Baghdadi knows how to seize the moment. He decided to exploit the chaos in neighboring Syria to establish a branch there, creating the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) almost overnight in 2013, seizing territories before the regime or the opposition knew what was going on. ISIS thus established a stronghold in Al-Raqqa, a city that was soon under its full control.

From the outset, Al-Baghdadi’s military style was robust and confrontational, favoring hit-and-run strikes and full-on raids. With breathtaking daring, the newly configured ISIS set about robbing banks and commandeering oilfields in the Syrian

province of Dayr Al-Zawr. Al-Baghdadi knew that Al-Qaeda under Osama Bin Laden had, in its heyday, been very wealthy and extremely well equipped. Such circumstances greatly increase a group's recruitment potential (it can pay its fighters) and its reach (via a much more sophisticated arsenal and intelligence). In Bin Laden's case, much of the money at Al-Qaeda's disposal came from his own personal fortune and connections in the Gulf. Al-Baghdadi decided not to rely on Arab sponsors (although Islamic State certainly has them) but simply to seize millions from whatever source came within his range.

Next, Al-Baghdadi squared up to the new Al-Qaeda leadership. He ignored orders from Al-Zawahiri to limit his operations to Iraq, effectively mounting a leadership challenge for the growing global jihadist army mustering on both sides of the border. It seemed clear that Al-Baghdadi intended to wrest control of the Global Jihad Movement (a pan-Islamic rather than predominantly Sunni movement), which Al-Zawahiri had co-founded back in 1998, from the aging fugitives in the Hindu Kush.

In contrast to his placid demeanor, Al-Baghdadi fully understood and exploited the power of extreme violence. Using the Internet and social media platforms, IS's slick propaganda wing launched a grisly campaign disseminating images of massacres, beheadings, public executions—some by young boys—and amputations. Al-Baghdadi's background as a scholar of the Quran and jurisprudence lent some authority to his organization's harsh justice. With the populations of both Iraq and Syria exhausted by lawlessness and fear, Al-Baghdadi is aware that any kind of judicial system might be viewed by them as a relief, at least initially. The Taliban was welcomed after the Afghan civil war for much the same reasons.

The boldest move of all came when Al-Baghdadi proclaimed the establishment of the caliphate at the beginning of Ramadan 2014 and then declared himself the caliph, leader of all the world's Muslims, in the Grand Mosque in Mosul, which IS had overrun days before. Statements since attest to an unlimited vision of world domination, with Rome, as well as Mecca and Medina, in the new caliph's sights. Is he a visionary or a megalomaniac crackpot? Most of the Western and international media know where they stand on that one; the jury is still out in much of the Arab World.

Popularity

Most successful popular movements have a charismatic leader who acquires legendary status—in their own very different fields we might think of Che Guevara, Malcolm X, or Gandhi. At the height of its success, Al-Qaeda became almost synonymous with Osama Bin Laden. Even though jihadist groups are careful to train two or three deputies for every man in a leadership role, Al-Qaeda has undeniably suffered from the loss of its poster boy and his replacement by the dour Dr. Ayman Al-Zawahiri.

Al-Baghdadi's boldness, defiance, steadfastness, and reputation as a clever battle-field strategist (borne out by his many military successes) have won him thousands of admirers across the Muslim World. For example, polls show that 92 percent of Saudis approve of the caliphate. As with Bin Laden, Al-Baghdadi's face—and the black and white *shahada* (I testify) flag that IS has made infamous—can be found on a whole range of merchandise, from t-shirts to mugs and badges, all of which were freely available on Facebook at the time of writing.

Al-Baghdadi also benefits from the support of an extensive tribal network. Al-Baghdadi's influence in his own tribal group—the same group as that of his predecessor, Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi Al-Qurayshi—is such that its elders immediately gave their *bayat* to the self-proclaimed caliph and the Islamic State as soon as it was born. Tribes from Samarra and Diyala had earlier supported ISI under Abu Omar, out of loyalty to Al-Baghdadi.

After Al-Baghdadi took over the leadership of IS, his first public utterance was a written eulogy for Osama Bin Laden on May 9, 2011; four audio messages are all that followed for the next two and a half years. Al-Baghdadi's video debut—the Grand Mosque sermon in which he declared the Islamic State and himself as caliph—was streamed the next day on the Internet, went viral on Twitter, was archived in the cloud, and afterward digitally disseminated to the world's media. Apart from that, his absence from the world's television and computer screens creates a mystique.

This is what we know of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi: he is a man of calm and pious manner and appearance but is calculating in his use of extreme violence; he is a shrewd and intelligent military tactician; he is a scholar of both law and scripture; he is a persuasive talker and preacher whose deliberate eschewing of publicity only enhances his charisma; and he is a careful manipulator of tribal loyalties, unafraid to topple others and take control himself.

Like Osama Bin Laden, he has been the subject of tributes by the poets of the jihadist world. September 2013 saw him praised in this *nasheed*. It was first posted on the IS YouTube channel (since deleted) and then widely circulated on the Internet. It seems to sum up the status and popularity the man enjoys, as well as the way he is perceived by the thousands of extremists who support Islamic State:

They have closed ranks and pledged *bayat* to Al-Baghdadi,
For he is our emir in our Iraq and ash-Sham [Syria].

For the Caliphate of God: I am its symbol.
Its glory has been decreed by our blood.
They have promised each other to protect the Caliphate.

From corner to corner
They have not held back from giving their lives for its survival.

They have closed ranks and pledged *bayat* to Al-Baghdadi,
For he is our emir in our Iraq and ash-Sham.

They have pledged *bayat* to our emir,
They are your heroic knights and our own weapon.
For he is the one to whom *bayat* is pledged in our land of Iraq and our land of
ash-Sham
And the land of all the Muslims.
He is our emir.

They have closed ranks and pledged *bayat* to Al-Baghdadi,
For he is our emir in our Iraq and ash-Sham.

Preserve the soldiers of Allah, oh our custodian.
The cross has returned to our land and our homes.
We offer our lives on our skulls,
We will vanquish oppression
While our enemies lie low.

They have closed ranks and pledged *bayat* to Al-Baghdadi,
For he is our emir in our Iraq and ash-Sham.

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1 The Islamic State also has been known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham or Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).