

Program on Extremism

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Caliph Dead, Caliphate Destroyed, New Era Begins: Legacy, Leadership, & the Global Jihad

- Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed on October 26, 2019.
- The location of the night raid in northern Syria raises questions about the Islamic State's covert depth in its rivals' strongholds.
- The death of al-Baghdadi has implications for the standing and future direction of not only the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria but also its transnational branches and the broader global jihadist milieu.
- President Trump's account of the raid suggests that al-Baghdadi died a panicked coward which Islamic State's jihadi rivals have leveraged to attack al-Baghdadi's well-crafted image of being a calm, stoic leader.

On the morning of October 27, 2019 President Donald Trump [announced](#) that the leader of Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, had been killed overnight in a United States special forces operation. President Trump described how weeks of surveillance and several cancelled prospective operations had finally led to a daring raid on a compound in northern Syria. The operation ended with al-Baghdadi being chased into a tunnel complex in which he reportedly detonated an explosive vest, killing himself and three children. President Trump thanked Russia, Turkey, the Assad regime, Iraq, and Syrian Kurds for their cooperation and indicated that valuable intelligence had been collected during the raid. The coming weeks and months will attest to the operational value of such intelligence, which may offer the U.S. and its allies opportunities to disrupt Islamic State's centrally coordinated operations, target other leaders across its transnational branches, and thwart Islamic State efforts to replenish and rebuild. With the territorial caliphate destroyed and its caliph dead, a new chapter in Islamic State's history will be written in the coming weeks and months. It will be characterized by a struggle for legacy, leadership, and the global jihad.

Why the operation's location matters

The location of al-Baghdadi's final moments in a compound near Barisha, Idlib province offers vital insights into the strength of Islamic State's networks in Syria versus Iraq, the group's mix of friends and allies in Syria's north, and its intentions for rebuilding its caliphate. That al-Baghdadi was hiding out in northern Syria instead of Iraq suggests that conditions there were assessed to be more conducive for sheltering the guerrilla caliph than

in his native Iraq. He likely relied on the Islamic State’s security and intelligence department, an entity within the organization that “[has come to oversee and manage an increasingly wide array of the group’s insurgent activities.](#)” The fact that al-Baghdadi had a sense of relative security—walking through the border town in northeast Syria and exposing himself to counterterrorism officials surveilling him—indicates both a failure on the part of his security department, and that the group’s leadership had ties and allies deep within their rivals’ strongholds. More important than mere geography, al-Baghdadi’s location is also indicative of the presence of friendly networks.

Idlib has been at the epicenter of insurgent Islamist groups and rebel factions battling the Syrian regime, including the newly designated terrorist organization and unofficial al-Qaida (AQ) affiliate in Syria [Tanzim Hurras ad-Din](#) (THD). According to posts on a Telegram channel that circulates THD news (see Figure 1), it appears that al-Baghdadi was hosted by a former THD operative. THD publicly announced its formation in February last year after its leaders—diehard AQ loyalists—split from Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Consequently, THD and HTS have an uneasy relationship, characterized by both clashes and opportunistic collaborations. Overall, however, THD, the Islamic State, and HTS see each other as rivals. Within this context and considering that al-Baghdadi’s hideout may have been indicative of where the Islamic State was planning to rebuild its shattered caliphate, these dynamics raise important questions about the Islamic State’s covert depth in its rivals’ stronghold, and the nature of its relationships with factions within HTS and THD.



Figure 1. Telegram Channel Supportive of THD Posted that Abu Muhammad al-Halabi who hosted al-Baghdadi belonged to THD

The al-Baghdadi vacuum & its implications

The killing of al-Baghdadi has created a vacuum both within the Islamic State as an organization and in the broader global jihadist milieu that will create risks and opportunities for friends and rivals alike. While al-Baghdadi is often flippantly described as a ‘charismatic leader,’ the position of ‘caliph’ generates its [authority](#) from the satisfaction of criteria that is both ‘legal-rational’ (e.g. satisfaction of shura council processes) and ‘traditional’ (e.g. al-Qurayshi tribal affiliation) in nature. In contrast, charisma is an emotion-based bond that forms due to how supporters perceive the leader. This may seem superficially ‘academic,’ but it is central to the competing claims of authority between Islamic State and its rivals, most notably AQ. It is for this reason that AQ’s senior leaders, such as Bin Laden and Zawahiri, ceded their authority to Mullah Omar as amir al-mu’minin (that is, until it was revealed that Omar had been [dead](#) for several years). Misunderstandings about the authority bonds that characterize leader-follower relations are also why idly declaring Hamza Bin

Laden as the 'heir apparent' to AQ leadership because he is Bin Laden's son (i.e. authority via hereditary succession) was potentially flawed because more substantive conditions for legitimating his authority were required. For the Islamic State, al-Baghdadi was presented as amir al-mu'minin as evidenced, for example, by the title of his final video appearance "[In the hospitality of amir al-mu'minin](#)". In short, Islamic State's al-Baghdadi was presented as the leader of the world's Muslims.

The challenge for the Islamic State will be how to balance internal organizational requirements while also continuing to 'out-compete' rivals like AQ for the mantle of leading the global jihad. History offers important [insights](#) into how the Islamic State is likely to deal with the death of its leader. Established succession processes similar, if not identical, to those that brought Abu Bakr and his predecessor, Abu Umar, into the role will be used to identify and legitimize al-Baghdadi's successor. The relative [stability](#) (organizational and strategic resilience) which al-Baghdadi brought to the Islamic State during the period of its most extreme boom and bust was due largely to the position he held rather than his personality. As the Islamic State's decline built momentum from 2016 onwards, reports of strategic and ideological [tensions](#) within the organization led to criticism of al-Baghdadi being publicly aired. Mounting internal [pressures](#) probably motivated al-Baghdadi's two public statements in 2019—an annual output equal only to 2014 when the caliphate was declared—to demonstrate that he remained an engaged and active leader. The schisms that [al-Baghdadi](#) was able to quell in life are unlikely to disappear now that he is dead, and his death may reignite those that he was able to placate while alive. An internally unstable Islamic State with competing factions is something its remaining leaders will want to avoid. However, the vacuum created by al-Baghdadi's death may offer unique opportunities for aspiring leaders and factions within the Islamic, and their resulting disputes may lead to a volatile dynamic of fractures and fusions within the organization and across the regional and global jihadist milieu.

Of the many questions regarding succession, one of the most important is whether al-Baghdadi's successor will be identified as a caliph or as an emir. The repercussions could be seismic. As J.M. Berger [suggested](#), if an emir initially replaces al-Baghdadi then opportunities for reconciliation with other groups and factions may arise. However, the position of emir does not have the jurisprudential gravitas of caliph, and the Islamic State would leave itself open to challenges within the organization as key figures of rival factions jockey for power. Such a decision would also create opportunities for Islamic State's rivals on the global stage (e.g. AQ), but also at more local provincial levels to challenge Islamic State franchises whose claims of authority rest on a caliphate that does not exist and a caliph who is dead. It is unlikely that al-Baghdadi's demise would open the door for AQ and the Islamic State to join forces in the near future. However, al-Baghdadi's successor and his views on the leadership of the global jihadist milieu and the rift between the two organizations may result in some level of realignment in the medium-to-long-term, probably involving breakaway factions. In Syria, al-Baghdadi's death is likely to favor HTS.

The battle for al-Baghdadi's legacy

There is value to competing for the narrative around al-Baghdadi's life and death. In the aftermath of a high-profile event, whether a terrorist attack or the killing of a terrorist leader, post-incident messaging plays an important role in shaping how a range of audiences understand what has happened and what it means for them and their communities. This process of meaning-generation occurs organically and is fundamentally shaped by pre-existing factors and biases. But actors also play an important top-down role in these processes. Killing terrorist leaders is an important counterterrorism tool whose value needs to be assessed by how it complements other tools and contributes to a broader strategy. For example, the argument that leadership decapitation merely creates martyrs misses the important point that the social and propagandistic processes involved in martyr construction largely begin, not end, with the death of an individual. It is in the aftermath of the death that meaning is generated and too-often this important component of leadership targeting has been ceded unchallenged to terrorist organizations.

Whether intentional or otherwise, President Trump's speech proactively shaped the narrative around al-Baghdadi's death, describing his final moments essentially as an act of murder-suicide, hopelessly killing three children along with himself by detonating an explosive vest and bringing the walls of a dead-end tunnel down upon himself. In stark contrast to the quiet, stoic, and authoritative figure Islamic State propagandists have sought to portray of al-Baghdadi over the years, President Trump described a panicked, fearful, and pathetic figure who 'died like a dog,' a line that is particularly impactful for cultural reasons. Already, Islamic State rivals have taken the President's descriptions and leveraged them in their own messaging. For example, HTS supporter networks on Telegram's official and unofficial channels posted pictures of President Trump and quoted him, using this opportunity to counter the Islamic State's narrative about the character of its leader.

While President Trump's descriptions of al-Baghdadi's final minutes have been criticized for being crude and potentially creating offence, such accusations miss the point that those who may be offended by such words (i.e. Islamic State sympathizers) are far more likely to be offended by the fact that al-Baghdadi is dead. For the vast majority of Muslims, al-Baghdadi led a genocidal movement that was most destructive to the populations that he claimed to be helping – Muslims. As a Syrian source explained, in death al-Baghdadi should be remembered for what he is an *'Afin* (عفن): the lowest form of coward.

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