

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Is ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the New Osama bin-Laden?

Two and a half years ago, President Obama declared, as America exited Iraq, that Iraq was now a “sovereign, stable and self-reliant” state. Today, radical jihadists are destroying Iraq. Over the last two weeks, Iraq has been invaded by fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS has astonished everyone as they have seized city after city in Iraq. They have captured countless weapons (most of them American) and hundreds of millions of dollars, making ISIS the wealthiest radical Muslim group in the world. ISIS is a highly organized, yet brutal, fanatical and ruthless brand of Sunni Islam. Its leader is the mysterious Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. There are only two known photos of him. Many analysts are now calling him the new Osama bin-Laden. Who is he? What are his goals? Why is he so ruthless?

- First of all, ISIS has its origins in the regional warfare associated with the Syrian Civil War. ISIS opposes Bashar Assad in Syria and has recruited many militant foreign fighters. Hence, it has gained valuable battlefield experience. As *The Economist* reports, “It is so zealous and bloodthirsty that other rebel groups in Syria have turned against it. Even al Qaeda renounced it, partly because al Qaeda does not approve of the idea of creating a state just now and partly because of ISIS’s savagery, including toward fellow Muslims.” How did ISIS come into being? There are three factors: (1) In the early months of the Syrian Civil War, Turkey allowed foreigners to easily cross its borders into Syria to topple Assad. In addition, European governments gave ISIS millions of dollars to buy the freedom of kidnapped citizens. Assad cynically helped ISIS by releasing the most extreme Muslims from his jails. His goal was to have the world withhold aid to his opponents, for fear of who might replace him. It has worked. (2) Iraq’s president Maliki, a devout Shiite Muslim, has governed as a dictator on behalf of the Shiite Muslims of Iraq. He purged the Iraqi army, replacing competent officers with his cronies. He failed to maintain links to the Sunni clans in Iraq, who had earlier driven al Qaeda from Iraq. Corruption in Iraq is widespread and the Sunni Muslims are totally alienated. (3) President Obama failed to win an agreement with Maliki that would have left some American troops as a buffer in Iraq and he has denied all requests for airstrikes. Further, his refusal to do anything to support even the more moderate elements in Syria seeking to topple Assad has allowed ISIS to exploit this vacuum of leadership. ISIS’s freedom to roam throughout Syria and Iraq could create a breeding ground for increased global terror. It has about 6,000 fighters in Iraq, between 3,000 and 5,000 in Syria, and about 3,000 foreigners from Chechnya, France, Britain and other nations. Its aim is to control territory and establish a radical Sunni state in Syria and Iraq. It is ruthless, slaughtering Shiites, Christians and Alawites, the clan from which Bashar Assad comes. It destroys churches, uses suicide bombers in public places and has no regard whatsoever for civilian casualties.

It seeks to establish a state in which militant Islamic Sharia law is the norm—no alcohol, tobacco and the total submission of women to men.

- Second, ISIS's leader is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. He is shrewd, ruthless and strategic. The United States had captured him in 2005 and held him for four years at the Bucca Camp in southern Iraq. He was freed. The US currently has a \$10 million bounty on his head. David Ignatius writes that he is "more violent, more virulent, more anti-American" than any other radical Muslim leader. He is far more charismatic than Ayman al-Zawahiri, who succeeded Osama bin Laden as head of al Qaeda. Zawahiri has been holed up in the border region of Pakistan and has done little to effectively re-organize al Qaeda. Meanwhile, Baghdadi has succeeded in both Syria and Iraq. Baghdadi claims to be a direct descendant of Muhammad. According to his biography, he holds a doctorate in Islamic studies and history from the Islamic University in Baghdad. Previously, he had been a preacher of Islam in Iraq. Theodore Karasik of the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis argues that "ISIS's rise at the expense of Zawahiri's movement signals that a new, more dangerous hybrid based on state development by wrecking everything in its path is emerging from the Syrian terrorist incubator. Ultimately, ISIS seeks to create an Islamic state from where they would launch a global holy war. Perhaps that war is now beginning as Baghdadi's ISIS eclipses Zawahiri's al Qaeda." The restoration of the Islamic Sunni caliphate based on a radical, purist form of Sunni Islam is the ISIS goal. Should he succeed, all assumptions about the Middle East will need to be re-examined.
- Finally, what is the nature of the Sunni-Shiite split in Islam, which is now ravaging the Middle East? Baghdadi has basically declared a jihad on the Shiite Muslims, willing to slaughter them in huge numbers to restore the Sunni caliphate. The split dates back to AD 632 when Muhammad died. The issue was who would succeed him. The majority, who would become the Sunni Muslims, backed Abu Bakr, a friend of Muhammad and the father of his wife. Others claimed that Muhammad had anointed Ali, his cousin and son-in-law. This group became known as the Shia, a contraction of "shiaat Ali," the partisans of Ali. Abu Bakr's supporters won out. Islam's split was cemented when Ali's son Hussein was killed in 680 in Karbala by the ruling Sunni caliph's troops. The Sunnis, who comprise about 80% of today's Muslims, dominate Islam and throughout history have monopolized political power. The Shiites have looked to their imams, the first 12 of whom descended from Ali, for guidance.

Is there a theological difference between the Sunnis and the Shiites? Both adhere to the theological proposition that Allah is the only God and Muhammad is his prophet (the First Pillar of Islam). Both adhere as well to the other traditional pillars of Islam, which include, five ritual daily prayers, giving to the poor, fasting during Ramadan and the commitment to a pilgrimage to Mecca. But Shiite Muslims look to their ayatollahs as reflections of Allah on earth. In addition, Shiites believe that the twelfth and final imam is hidden and will reappear one day to fulfill Allah's will. His reappearance, they believe, will be associated with an end-of-the-age apocalypse. Baghdadi is therefore a significant challenge to the growing Shiite crescent that has been emerging with the rise of Iran, the only significant Shiite state in the world. That crescent extends from Iran through Syria down to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. If successful, Baghdadi would sever this

crescent. For that reason, expect Iran to become more involved in challenging Baghdadi in Iraq. The danger of a brutal sectarian war between Sunni and Shiite Islam is real and growing. It seems more and more doubtful that Sunnis and Shiite Muslims will be able to coexist in the Middle East. Should such a conflict intensify, the Middle East will face increasing levels of horrific violence. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is not only a threat to the Shiites; he is a threat to the fragile political order of the entire region.

See Terrence McCoy in www.washingtonpost.com (16 June 2014) and *The Economist* (14 June 2014), pp. 11, 41-42 (and 28 May 2013).