

ISIS Is Dead, Long Live the Islamic State

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

Will the declaration of a new caliphate unite the world's jihadists or tear them apart?

On the first night of Ramadan, the spokesman for the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) announced a step that he described as "a dream that lives in the depths of every Muslim believer": the re-establishment of the Caliphate. "It is a hope that flutters in the heart of every mujahid [one who does jihad] muwahhid [monotheist]," spokesman Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami went on. "It is the caliphate. It is the caliphate -- the abandoned obligation of the era...We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of the caliphate, it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the caliph [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi]."

The announcement by the group, which is now calling itself simply the Islamic State (IS), will accelerate the backlash against it in Iraq. The Islamic State has worked with other insurgent factions, such as the ex-Baathists in the JRTN (Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order), in its recent offensive in Iraq -- but has no intention of power-sharing in the captured areas. There were already signs that JRTN and IS were beginning to fight one another, and this announcement will likely push things into an open confrontation. The Islamic State, however, views this as a positive development because it will separate those who believe in haqq [truth] from batil [falsehood]. It believes the announcement will also serve as another direct shot at al Qaeda and its official branches.

ADNANI'S SPEECH

A few key themes dominate Adnani's speech: triumph, legitimacy, duty, and steadfastness. Regarding the first, Adnani projects a positive trajectory for the Islamic State: "The sun of jihad has risen. The glad tidings of good are shining. Triumph looms on the horizon. The signs of victory have appeared." He also congratulates the group's followers for their accomplishments: "As for you, oh soldiers of the Islamic State, then congratulations to you. Congratulations on this clear victory, congratulations on this great triumph...Now the caliphate has returned, humbling the necks of the enemy. Now the caliphate has returned, in spite of its opponents. Now the caliphate has

returned; we ask God to make it to be upon the manhaj [methodology] of prophethood. Now hope is being actualized. Now the dream has become a reality."

In terms of legitimacy, the caliph is historically supposed to be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad's Quraysh tribe in Arabia. Since Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the leader of the Islamic State in 2010, he has claimed that he is a descendant of Muhammad and from the Quraysh tribe. Many have questioned whether the claim was legitimate but, for the first time, Adnani describes Baghdadi's lineage and his plan to now use his real name, Ibrahim, in reference to him being caliph, to illustrate his legitimate claim. Beyond the question of the Islamic legitimacy of Baghdadi's leadership, Adnani also preempts criticism of the announcement itself: "If your leaders whisper to you claiming it is not a caliphate, then remember how long they whispered to you claiming that it was not a state but rather a fictional, cardboard entity, until its certain news reached you. It is a state. Its news will continue to reach you showing that it is a caliphate, even if after time."

The creation of the caliphate has created a "with us or against us" mentality within the Islamic State, which is likely to create even more enemies. "So let those leaders [who oppose the announcement] be ruined," said Adnani. "And let that ummah [Islamic nation] they want to unite be ruined -- an ummah of secularists, democrats, and nationalists... an ummah of murjia [a sect that excludes deeds from faith], ikhwan [the Muslim Brotherhood], and sururiyya [a Muslim Brotherhood-influenced sect claiming to be Salafists]."

Due to these many enemies, Adnani warns the fighters and defenders of the Islamic State that they will need steadfastness in the time ahead. "Oh, soldiers of the Islamic State, you will be facing malahim [fierce battles] that cause the children's hair to become gray," he said. "You will be facing fitan [tribulations] and hardships of many different colors. You will be facing tests and quakes. No one will survive them except he whom God grants mercy."

Finally, Adnani outlines the duties and responsibilities for Muslims in general and those who live within the Islamic State's current borders, now that the caliphate has been established. For all intents and purposes, according to the Islamic State, there is no other authority but them: "We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of the caliphate, it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the Caliph Ibrahim and support him," said Adnani. "The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations becomes null by the expansion of the caliph's authority and arrival of its troops to their areas."

HISTORICAL RESONANCE AND RELEVANCE

The Islamic State's announcement of the re-establishment of the caliphate has been a long time coming. It has also been a hope and dream for many Muslims over the decades, even if most do not necessarily agree with the Islamic State's ideological leanings. The contemporary run-up to this announcement dates to Oct. 15, 2006, when the Islamic State of Iraq was first created and the movement for the first time attempted to establish institutions and governing structures. More recently, on March 25, 2014, the Islamic State and its key influencers online floated a trial balloon hashtag in Arabic, #We_Demand_Shaykh_al-Baghdadi_Declare_The_Caliphate, to get feedback on how individuals would react to such a declaration. Of course those who supported ISIS at the time were thrilled with the possibility, while those who opposed the group took issue.

The announcement of the caliphate's creation on the first day of Ramadan, which is the holiest month of the year for Muslims, was no doubt meant to invoke the religious significance of the event. But the Gregorian date has significance as well: The June 29 announcement came one day after the 100th anniversary of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife, Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg, which marked the beginning of World War I. While many historians point to Ataturk's abolishment of the caliphate on March 3, 1924, as the end of the last line of caliphs, Islamic State followers see this as just the logical conclusion of a process that started a decade earlier with WWI, which led to the partition of the Middle Eastern states -- a narrative that resonates for many in the

region. Therefore, the June 29, 2014, announcement has been framed as an end to a century-long calamity, and as marking the return of dignity and honor to the Islamic umma.

The Islamic State can and will argue that it is the heir of past caliphates, especially the original Rashidun Caliphate (632-661). The Islamic State will also claim that it has been able to achieve what no other Islamist movement, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, has been able to do in the past century: fill the void left by the abolition of the caliphate and create a Muslim renaissance. It can now also argue that -- unlike the past failed attempts to resurrect the caliphate by the Khilafat Movement in British India and the stillborn Sharifian Caliphate in what is today Saudi Arabia -- the Islamic State was actually able to deliver a success for Muslims, and provide them with hope and strength once more.

THE WAR WITH AL QAEDA

In addition to the chorus of Muslims worldwide rejecting -- and some even mocking -- the Islamic State's announcement, those in the leadership of al Qaeda and its affiliates are in a precarious position. On the one hand, they are happy with the Islamic State's recent advances in Iraq and do not in theory have an issue with a caliphate -- though they may publicly argue it is too soon, or they may have privately hoped they would be the ones leading its reinstatement. On the other hand, Adnani's proclamation could severely debilitate al Qaeda, which has been hit hard by the group's advances in the past 15 months. Most notably, the Islamic State is eclipsing the Nusra Front, al Qaeda's official branch in Syria, gaining a military edge with foreign fighters and with defections of some members of other al Qaeda branches in Afghanistan, North Africa, and Yemen.

The Islamic State hopes to put al Qaeda and its branches in the unenviable position of having to reconcile with the reality of the new caliphate, or oppose it and therefore be viewed by global jihadis as hindering the caliphate project and showing its true nature as a sectarian organization that is not working for the best interests of Muslims. That strategy, however, is a gamble: It could open the Islamic State up for an even bigger fall if it does not follow through on its promise to fight enemies on all fronts, and if it fails in governing newly captured areas. There is already insurgent and noncombatant resistance to the Islamic State's gains in both Syria and Iraq, so the group therefore has a thin needle to thread.

Jihadists' reactions to the Islamic State's re-establishment of the caliphate have so far been mixed. There are signs that al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula foot soldiers are excited about the alleged caliphate coming to fruition, while many within the Nusra Front are condemning it and sarcastically making fun of it, calling it a Twitter Caliphate. Maldivian jihadists in Syria under the banner of Bilad al-Sham Media have released a rebuke, arguing that the announcement strays from the true Islamic way of establishing a caliphate, and noting that it needs to have broader support. Most importantly, a number of top jihadist sheikhs, such as Hamid bin Ali and Hani al-Siba'i, have rebuked the announcement. The key Syrian Islamist rebel groups and Islamic bodies also rejected the Islamic State's reestablishment of the caliphate.

In contrast, a small jihadist faction fighting in Syria, Jaysh al-Sahaba in Bilad al-Sham, which was previously sympathetic to the Nusra Front, as well as the Lebanon-based and ISIS-sympathetic media outlet Aisha Media Center, have both now officially pledged their loyalty to the Islamic State. With the Islamic State also recently gaining new loyalty oaths from tribal members in Syria and Iraq, as well as members who have defected from the Nusra Front and Ansar al-Islam, momentum continues to be on its side. In the near term, whether jihadist groups in the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza Strip, and North Africa officially pledge their loyalty to the Islamic State could be a sign of whether or not its latest decision enjoys support beyond words of sympathy.

The announcement to reestablish the caliphate could be another success for the Islamic State, which it will take as confirmation that "God's will" is truly on its side. Or it may mark the beginning of the end of the Islamic State's second attempt at ruling territory in less than a decade.

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