

# THE ISLAMIC STATE WITHOUT A 'CALIPHATE'

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The life and death of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi were similar to that of many other top commanders of the Islamic State (IS). He had served in Saddam Hussein's military in Iraq. He joined Sunni militancy after the fall of the Saddam regime in 2003. In 2007, he became a member of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). In 2009, he was imprisoned in Camp Bucca, a notorious U.S.-run prison in Iraq that turned out to be a factory of radicalisation. Out of prison, he went back to the al-Qaeda fold, which was called the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Within the ISI, Qurayshi worked closely with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the future founder leader of the Islamic State 'Caliphate' who was also an inmate of Camp Bucca. In 2019, after Baghdadi killed himself during a U.S. raid at his house in Syria's jihadist-controlled Idlib, Qurayshi, whose real name was Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla, was appointed by the 'Shura Council' as the new leader of the IS. Twenty-seven months later, on February 3, 2022, Qurayshi blew himself up along with his family, like his predecessor, amid a U.S. raid at his residence in Idlib. The IS will now have to find a new 'caliph' to run the caliphate that no longer exists.

## The rise

The roots of the Islamic State can be traced to the ruins of Iraq. The chaos and anarchy that prevailed in Iraq after the 2003 American invasion threw open opportunities for jihadist networks in the region. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, born in Jordan and trained in Afghanistan, laid the foundations of the AQI after the invasion. Zarqawi turned the anti-American resistance into a sectarian civil war between the minority Sunnis and the majority Shias. By 2005-06, the AQI plunged Iraq, especially the northern and central provinces, into a deadly cycle of violence.

Zarqawi, a Salafi-Jihadist who set up AQI with the blessings of Osama bin Laden, was killed in an American strike in 2006, which was a body blow to his terror enterprise. Later, Iraq's Sunni tribesmen, fed up with the growing sectarian conflict and the AQI's mindless violence, set up, with support from the U.S., militia groups ('Sunni Awakening') to take on al-Qaeda. While the Awakening militias resisted the jihadists on the ground, the U.S. continued to carry out strikes targeting the AQI's leaders. Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, Zarqawi's successors, were killed in U.S. strikes. These setbacks substantially weakened al-Qaeda in Iraq. It was after Omar Baghdadi's death, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi rose to the leadership of the AQI, also called the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).

Desperately trying to revive the lost fortunes of the ISI, Baghdadi found an opportunity when a civil strife broke out in Syria in 2011. What began as anti-regime demonstrations as part of 'the Arab Spring' protests, the crisis in Syria quickly slipped into an armed conflict, with the government of President Bashar al-Assad, backed by Iran, on one side, and different armed militias, backed by Mr. Assad's regional rivals, from Turkey to Saudi Arabia, on the other. Baghdadi dispatched a group of militants, under the command of Abu Muhammad al-Joulani, across the border to set up an al-Qaeda unit in Syria. Joulani established Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian arm of al-Qaeda, which captured territories in the lawless, civil war-hit eastern Syria that was awash with money, weapons and militants. Baghdadi and Joulani would part ways when the former insisted that al-Nusra join the ISI to create the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS), a new terrorist entity independent of al-Qaeda. Joulani refused to break ties with al-Qaeda and those who were loyal to Baghdadi joined ISIS, also called the Islamic State, or IS. (Joulani is now running Syria's Idlib province, the last outpost of the civil war).

Exploiting the civil war in Syria and the growing resentment among the Sunnis against the sectarian policies of the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq, the IS, under Baghdadi's command, grew fast. It captured territories, from Raqqa in eastern Syria to Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, straddling the borders of the two countries.

On July 4, 2014, the first Friday of the Muslim holy month Ramzan, Baghdadi, who then had a \$10 million bounty on his head, appeared at the *minbar* (pulpit) of the Grand Mosque of Mosul. Dressed in a wavy black robe and wearing a black turban, he announced the establishment of a new Caliphate. He also asked for obedience from the world's Muslims as he had been "elected" as their *wali* (custodian). At its peak, the IS Caliphate had spread from Deir Ez-zor in eastern Syria to the outskirts of Baghdad, encompassing territories as large as Great Britain.

But the Caliphate would crumble within years. In Iraq and Syria, different coalitions were formed to defeat the IS. The first setback came in Kobane, a Kurdish town on the Syrian-Turkish border where Kurdish militias, backed by the U.S., defeated the IS. Palmyra, the ancient Syrian city, was recaptured from the IS by the Syrian government troops, backed by Russia. In Iraq, the national army, Iran-trained Popular Mobilisation Forces (Shia militias) and the Peshmerga (the Iraqi Kurdish militia), with help from the U.S., fought for every inch of the lost territory and reclaimed them. In 2019, the IS lost its last shred of enclave, Baghouz in Syria, to the Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish militia. In the same year, Baghdadi was killed.

## **New model**

Baghdadi introduced a new model in the global jihadist landscape. Al-Qaeda largely operated as a hit-and-run organisation. The IS built a proto-state in the name of the Caliphate and held on to its territories for years. The proto-state in Iraq and Syria became the core of the IS's operations, while the rest of the world made its periphery. The core imported recruits, radicalised Muslim youth, from across the world, and exported terror back. But when this model came under pressure with the collapse of the proto-state, the IS turned itself into an underground insurgency.

Qurayshi, Baghdadi's successor, inherited this insurgency. Unlike Baghdadi, who occasionally released audio (and rarely video) messages, Qurayshi kept a low profile. The IS became a loose confederation of many *wilayats* (provinces). In the troubled Sahel region of Africa, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) strengthened its operations. In Afghanistan, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) stepped up attacks after the Taliban returned to power. In Iraq and Syria, however, the IS struggled to take back territories.

A few weeks earlier, the IS carried out its biggest operation since the death of Baghdadi in Syria's al-Hasakah. It was a coordinated assault — suicide bombers struck a prison holding thousands of IS militants in Hasakah with a truck bomb and a gun battle followed, while IS inmates inside the jail revolted against the guards. It was also the most ambitious attack ordered by Qurayshi, who was personally involved in the raid, according to some reports. The raid was, however, a failure as hundreds of U.S. troops joined the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurdish militia, to push back the IS. In less than two weeks, came Qurayshi's death.

The Caliphate was destroyed. The Caliphs were killed. And the foot soldiers are dispersed. For a terrorist group that grew from nothing to a proto-regime controlling some of the biggest cities in the Arab world within a span of few years, this is a period of setbacks and retreat. But its revivalist ideology and terrorist capabilities, as demonstrated in Hasakah last month, remain unbroken. Also, the geopolitical conditions that allowed the IS to rise in the first place haven't changed much in Asia and Africa. When conflicts continue in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and West Africa, the IS or al-Qaeda would always find a way to survive the occasional setbacks.

## **In Focus**

***The roots of the IS can be traced to al-Qaeda in Iraq, founded by Abu Musab Zarqawi after the U.S. invasion of the country in 2003***

***Under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the IS captured territories across the Syrian-Iraqi border and declared an Islamic State Caliphate***

***The physical Caliphate of the IS was destroyed by 2019 by different coalition forces, including the Kurdish and Shia militias, Iraqi and Syrian armies and the U.S. and Russia***

***The repeated military setbacks in Iraq and Syria have weakened the Islamic State organisationally, but its revivalist ideology and terrorist capability remain unbroken***

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