

# An Analysis of Al-Baghdadi's 26 August 2019 Audio Message

This article analyses the latest speech of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed Caliph of the Islamic State (IS). The audio message was released for the Muslim Eid celebration, after nearly a year since al-Baghdadi's last audio message and while several reports speculated on his death. This is the longest public speech recorded by al-Baghdadi, the previous ones never exceeded half an hour.

Al-Baghdadi delivered a fervent speech, with monotheism (*tawhīd*) at its heart. He stressed on monotheism as a tool and an end for IS. Fighting the enemy is a path to achieve monotheism, global theory of Islam (*hakimiyyah*), and loyalty and repudiation (*al-Wala' wa al-bara'*). In another part of the speech, he said that only through monotheism, Muslim victory can be achieved.

Patience was also a central theme of al-Baghdadi's message. It is also a key Islamic virtue, which is referred to in several Hadiths. As the group is largely weakened in Iraq and Syria, al-Baghdadi attempted to raise the morals of his fighters by bringing examples of the suffering of the *Salaf* (the followers of Prophet Mohammad in the early years of Islam), such as the battle of Uhud (625 CE), in which Muslims were defeated by their Arab opponents. In other words, while IS lost a battle – or effectively battles – it did not lose the war yet and will patiently wait for the opportunity to regain military capabilities and superiority.

Consistently playing with sectarianism, al-Baghdadi capitalized on the Syrian conflict, which is mired in its seventh year and entangled in a web of fighting factions. The self-proclaimed Caliph called the Syrian Sunni factions to pledge allegiance to him and join his group. This strategy contrasts with the steady verbal assaults aimed at delegitimizing warring groups in Syria, especially the *Sahwat*, or Syrian rebels. In June 2015, al-Adnani accused the “apostate” *Sahwat* of “treason and betrayal” (al-Adnani, 2015) while in December 2016, al-Muhajir referred to them as “anti-[ISIS] Sunni forces” (al-Muhajir, 2016). In February 2017, the sixth issue of *Rumiyyah* slammed those groups for their peace agreement with the regime of Bashar al-Assad. In this last speech, it seems that al-Baghdadi wishes to end those Sunni fratricide quarrels. This demonstrates the urgency for IS to regroup in order to keep the insurgency going.

In the same vain, a great amount of al-Baghdadi's utterance was utilized to recruit new fighters in Jordan and the Arab peninsula. Certainly due to their geographic proximity, al-Baghdadi targeted Jordanian youth as primary recruits. His argumentation revolved around the socio-economic conditions in the Hashemite

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Kingdom. He contended that instead of demonstrating in streets against the “dictators”, Jordanian Muslims should join IS. He claimed that reform “can only be achieved through removing the [tawaghit]”, referring to King Abdulla and the Jordanian government. With regard to Saudi Arabia, the leader used a religious discourse instead. He urged the Saudis to fight “excommunication of Muslims” and “secularism” policies of the Crown Prince, Mohammad Bin Salman. This demonstrates that IS’ discourse is still very well-articulated, culturally sensitive and playing on local socio-economic and political specificities to best reach its audiences.

Perhaps the most interesting comments al-Baghdadi made came at the end of his audio message. He called his group for more internal cohesion. Doing so, the leader undoubtedly intends to remedy the dispute between the Binali and the Hazemi trends. The latter emerged in late 2014 as a more radical current that is believed to have infiltrated the media offices of the Caliphate in order to display its extreme ideas, especially on the interpretation of excommunication or *takfirism*. Since then, IS has suffered from this ideological competition and executed several of its members who were deemed disloyal (Middle East Monitor, 2015). To keep the front united, al-Baghdadi called his fighters to obey their local leaders, the Amirs, and submit to them. “Commit to the group, and avoid schism with your Amirs”, said al-Baghdadi. He went on, “be aware of those who horn in between you and your Amirs and attempt to revive hatreds”.

While external divisions with competing Sunnis and non-Sunni groups has always been the cornerstone of IS’ discourse and legitimacy, the group has been cautious about not exposing its internal divisions. In other words, in order to portray itself as the sole and true defender of Sunni Muslims in the war in Syria and Iraq – and elsewhere in the world – IS needs to be united and cohesive. Hence, the internal dispute within the Jihadi group has been dealt in secret, and have been understudied by experts. Yet, IS is suffering from a quarrel between two dominant trends: the Binali and Hazemi trends (Hamming, 2016).

The Binali’s trend was founded by Sheikh Turki Binali, a Bahraini born in 1984. He was a student of the Palestinian-Jordanian theologian Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi who noticed “his extraordinary passion and support for the religion, for God’s unity (*tawhīd*), for jihad, and for the [mujaheddin]”. After the Arab Spring, Binali seized the opportunity to travel and to give lectures on the topic of excommunications. Reports suggest that he travelled to Syria in early 2014 and quickly became an active member of IS (U.S. Department of Treasury, 2016). His charismatic personality and radical ideas pleased al-Baghdadi who appointed him a chief Mufti in late 2014. In fact, Binali was never granted this title. He was the

Amir of a body called the Office of Research and Studies (*Maktab al-Buhuth wa al-Dirasat*), which used to be responsible for preparing fatwas and other religious texts studied in the IS' training camps and published by its official press. Nevertheless, Binali's authority was contested by though ideological enemies, the Hazemis.

The Hazemi trend – founded by Meccan-born Abu Abdulla al-Hazemi – is considered the extremist drift inside IS. Similarly to Binali, the al-Hazemi travelled to Tunisia in 2011 where he preached a controversial doctrine known as *Takfir al-'adhir*, or the “excommunication of the excuser”. He is in jail in Saudi Arabia since spring 2015. Yet, proponents of the Hazemi approach are many in IS and are especially believed to dominate the Delegate Committee (*al-Lajna al-Mufawwada*) of the Caliphate, which is in charge of supervising IS' provinces, departments, committees and offices such as ... the Office of Research and Studies.

The key object of contention between those two factions is over this doctrine of excommunication. Put in another way, the question is to know whether one can excommunicate a Muslim on the basis of ignorance. Binali and al-Hazemi have been vehemently debating on it from the mid-2014 through verbal and written statements and tweets. Al-Hazemi argues that the one who excuses an unbeliever on the basis of ignorance is guilty of unbelief her/himself. According to Binali, while ignorance cannot be an excuse for unbelief, the one who excuses unbelief on the basis of ignorance should not be immediately declared an unbeliever her/himself. This is the official stance adopted by IS. The rationale is that al-Hazemi's interpretation would lead to excommunication, or *Takfir*, in infinite regress. Actually, it would lead to excommunicate al-Baghdadi himself. Indeed, al-Baghdadi did not excommunicate Zawahiri who himself is an unbeliever as he refused to excommunicate Shia Muslims.

The competition over the question of *takfirism* reached its peak in later 2014. The Delegate Committee and other administrations – within IS that supported the Binali current – issued a series of statements that threatened their ideological enemies and advocate for their preferred interpretation of excommunication (Bunzel, 2017). It is believe that al-Baghdadi himself solved the issue, hunting and killing the members disloyal to the official doctrine of IS, and charging the central offices of spreading the “truth” about *takfirsism* (Orton, 2018).

Yet, in spite of strengthening the ideological cohesion within IS, al-Baghdadi's audio message suggests that the group might still suffer from internal split. While the leader does not explicitly refer to the Hazemi followers, one can imagine that, he fears Hazemi sleeping cells that might be hiding within IS after the 2015

internal repression. The consequences of a rebellion against the Caliph would be disastrous for IS, which is already considerably weakened.

To sum up, al-Baghdadi's audio message is consistent with the general discourse of IS, that is a Salafi-Jihad discourse heavily loaded with religious and sectarian notes. Second, the speech shows the group's disarray after its military decline and its absolute necessity to recruit fighters in the Middle Eastern region. Third, the al-Baghdadi's utterance implies that the group is suffering from internal dispute and lack of loyalty to its leadership. Hence, amid military and ideological struggle, the top priority of IS is to put an end to gangrenous internal and external divisions. Internal cohesion is the sine qua non condition for the Jihadi group to regain its status of major actor in the context of the war in Syria – and its legitimacy among local populations.

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