

Islamic State's Chief Al-Baghdadi Survived a 'Coup' by His Fighters

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Martin Chulov [reported](#) [1] for The Guardian yesterday, February 7, the Islamic State's chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had survived a coup attempt last month by foreign fighters within the ranks of the terrorist organization in its holdout in Hajin in eastern Syria near the town of Al-Bukamal on the border between Syria and Iraq, and the Islamic State had reportedly placed a bounty on the main plotter's head.

The report states:

"The incident is believed to have taken place on 10 January in a village near Hajin in the Euphrates River valley, where the jihadist group is clinging to its last sliver of land. Regional intelligence officials say a planned move against Baghdadi led to a firefight between foreign fighters and the fugitive terrorist chief's bodyguards, who spirited him away to the nearby deserts."

The report further adds:

"Isis has offered a reward to whomever kills Abu Muath al-Jazairi, believed to be a veteran foreign fighter, one of an estimated 500 Isis fighters thought to remain in the area. While Isis did not directly accuse Jazairi, placing a bounty on the head of one of its senior members is an unusual move and intelligence officials believe he was the central plotter."

The divisions within the rank and file of the terrorist organization seem to be growing as it has lost all its territory and is now surrounded in a border town, with the US-backed Kurdish militias pressing their offensive from the west on the Syrian side and the Iran-backed militias from the east on the Iraqi side of the border. Moreover, due to frequent desertions, it now has only several hundred fighters left within its ranks.

The Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is known to be a diabetic, suffering from high blood pressure and had suffered a permanent injury in an airstrike several years ago. Although al-Baghdadi has not publicly appointed a successor, two of the closest aides who have emerged as his likely successors over the years are Iyad al-Obaidi, his defense minister, and Ayad al-Jumaili, the in charge of security.

The latter of the two had already reportedly been killed in an airstrike in April 2017 in al-Qaim region on Iraq's border with Syria. Thus, the most likely successor of al-Baghdadi would be al-Obaidi. Both al-Jumaili and al-Obaidi had previously served as security officers in Iraq's Baathist army under Saddam Hussein, and al-Obaidi is known to be the [de facto deputy](#) [2] of al-Baghdadi.

Moreover, according to an [AFP report](#) [3] last year, hundreds of Islamic State's jihadists had joined the so-called "moderate rebels" in Syria's northwestern Idlib Governorate where they were surrounded by the Syrian government troops. The Islamic State already had a foothold in neighboring Hama province and its foray into Idlib was an extension of its outreach.

Though the AFP report authored by Maya Gebeily seems to have been taken down by Yahoo News because it mentioned that on January 12, 2018 the Islamic State officially declared Idlib one of its "Islamic emirates." The Islamic State had captured several villages and claimed to have killed two dozen Syrian soldiers and taken twenty hostages, according to the report.

In all likelihood, some of the Islamic State's jihadists who joined the battle in Idlib were part of the same contingent of militants that fled Raqqa in October 2017 under a [deal brokered](#) [4] by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). In fact, one of the main objectives of the deal was to let the jihadists fight the Syrian government troops and to free up the Kurdish-led SDF in a scramble to capture oil and gas fields in Deir al-Zor and the border posts along Syria's border with Iraq.

The reason why the AFP report has been redacted appears to be that it did not meet the editorial line of the mainstream media. As it mentioned Idlib, which is surrounded by the Syrian government troops, as an "Islamic emirate" of the Islamic State, which could provide a pretext to the Syrian armed forces backed by Russian airstrikes to mount an offensive there.

It bears mentioning that Idlib has firmly been under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) led by al-Nusra Front since 2015. And in a brazen offensive last month, the al-Nusra jihadists completely routed Turkey-backed militants, and al-Nusra now reportedly controls more than 70% of territory in Idlib Governorate.

The reason why al-Nusra Front has been easily able to defeat Turkey-backed militants appears to be that the ranks of al-Nusra Front have now been swelled by deserters from the Islamic State after the fall of its "caliphate" in Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria. The merger of al-Nusra Front and Islamic State in Idlib doesn't come as a surprise, though, since the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front used to be a [single organization](#) [5] before a split occurred between the two militant groups in April 2013 over a leadership dispute.

Furthermore, the Islamic State's foray into Idlib isn't the only instance of its kind. Remember when the Syrian government forces were on the verge of winning a resounding victory against the militants holed up in east Aleppo, the Islamic State came to the rescue of so-called "moderate rebels" by opening up a new front in Palmyra in December 2016.

Consequently, the Syrian government had to send reinforcements from Aleppo to Palmyra in order to defend the city. Although the Syrian government troops still managed to evict the militants holed up in the eastern enclave of Aleppo and they also retook Palmyra from Islamic State in March 2017, the basic purpose of this tactical move by the Islamic State was to divert the attention and resources of the Syrian government away from Aleppo to Palmyra.

Fact of the matter is that the distinction between Islamic jihadists and purported "moderate rebels" in Syria is more illusory than real. Before it turned rogue and overran Mosul in Iraq in June 2014, Islamic State used to be an integral part of the Syrian opposition and it still

enjoys close ideological and operational ties with other militant groups in Syria.

It's worth noting that although turf wars are common not just between the Islamic State and other militant groups operating in Syria but also among rebel groups themselves, the ultimate objective of the Islamic State and the rest of militant outfits operating in Syria was the same: to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad.

Notwithstanding, in order to create a semblance of objectivity and fairness, the American policymakers and analysts are always willing to accept the blame for the mistakes of the distant past that have no bearing on the present; however, any fact that impinges on their present policy is conveniently brushed aside.

In the case of the creation of the Islamic State, for instance, the US policy analysts are willing to concede that invading Iraq back in 2003 was a mistake that radicalized the Iraqi society, exacerbated sectarian divisions and gave birth to an unrelenting Sunni insurgency against the heavy handed and discriminatory policies of the Shi'a-led Iraqi government.

Similarly, the "war on terror" era political commentators also "generously" accept the fact that the Cold War era policy of nurturing al-Qaeda and myriads of Afghan so-called "freedom fighters" against the erstwhile Soviet Union was a mistake, because all those fait accompli have no bearing on their present policy.

The corporate media's spin-doctors conveniently forget, however, that the creation of the Islamic State and myriads of other jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq had as much to do with the unilateral invasion of Iraq back in 2003 under the Bush administration as it was the doing of the Obama administration's policy of funding, arming, training and internationally legitimizing the militants against the Syrian government since 2011-onward.

In fact, the proximate cause behind the rise of the Islamic State, al-Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam and numerous other militant groups in Syria and Iraq was the Obama administration's policy of intervention through proxies in Syria.

The border between Syria and Iraq is highly porous and poorly guarded. The Obama administration's policy of nurturing militants against the Syrian government was bound to have its blowback on Iraq, sooner or later. Therefore, as soon as the Islamic State consolidated its gains in Syria, it overran Mosul and Anbar in Iraq in early 2014 from where the US had withdrawn its troops only a couple of years ago in December 2011.

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Notes

[1] ISIS leader believed to have fled coup attempt by his fighters:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/07/isis-leader-believed-to-have-fled-coup-attempt-by-his-o>

[wn-fighters](#)

[2] Military chief, al-Obeidi, could be the new commander of ISIS:

<http://www.atimes.com/article/military-chief-new-commander-isis/>

[3] Four years and one caliphate later, Islamic State claims Idlib comeback:

<https://uk.news.yahoo.com/four-years-one-caliphate-later-claims-idlib-comeback-143938964.html>

[4] Raqqa's dirty secret: the deal that let Islamic State jihadists escape Raqqa:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/raqqas_dirty_secret

[5] Al-Nusra Front: Islamic State's Breakaway Faction in Syria's Idlib:

<https://www.globalresearch.ca/al-nusra-front-islamic-states-breakaway-faction-in-syrias-idlib/5667920>

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