

From the Ba'th to the Caliphate: the former officers of Saddam and the Islamic State

By Romain Caillet

■ Executive summary

After being overlooked by the media during the first two years of the Syrian uprising and underestimated by most observers until the capture of Mosul and the announcement of the return of the Caliphate on June 29th 2014, the Islamic State (IS) jihadists have since been in the spotlight and are being “taken seriously”. All IS political decisions, whether acted on or not, have received wide media coverage. As for the “management of savagery” (the title of a book on jihadist movements) that IS applies, it is equally shocking and fascinating well beyond jihadist circles. Some observers insist on dissociating IS from Islam either out of political conviction or a desire to avoid any association between it and the faith. While it is wise to refrain from essentialist interpretations and to be aware of the purely political and what French political scientist François Burgat terms the “perfectly profane” dimension of the IS leaders’ engagement, it would be a mistake to see them merely as a bunch of skilful opportunistic individuals who manipulate religion for personal ambitions without any ideological or religious considerations.

Insights into the jihadist commitment of the former officers of Saddam Hussayn

Just a few days after the takeover of Mosul by jihadists on the night of June 9th-10th 2014, I took part in a radio show in which I explained that what the Islamic State (IS) leaders wanted was indeed to create a transnational state on the ruins of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. However, another guest on the show was quick to contradict me, saying that this could not possibly be their plan. According to him, IS leaders were former Ba'th officers under Saddam Hussayn, which implies that they had been trained and groomed in secular nationalism and were therefore far too realistic to embark on such an unrealistic and utopian project.

Nonetheless, less than three weeks later Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, the IS spokesperson, announced the return of the Caliphate, some 90 years after it was abolished by Atatürk. If the former officers of Saddam Hussayn are indeed today part of the IS leadership, then this must be

understood within the context of the old trend of the Iraqisation of al-Qa'ida's command in Mesopotamia, a strategy set in motion by Jordanian jihadist Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and his adviser, Abu Anas al-Shami. Thus, Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's predecessor as the head of the organisation and former police colonel who was killed in 2010; Hajji Bakr, a former colonel killed in January 2014; Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Bilawi, a former captain of the Presidential Guard who was killed near Mosul in June 2014; and Abu Muhannad al-Suwaydawi,¹ a former lieutenant colonel of air defence intelligence are all former officers of the Ba'th regime.² At the local command level Saddam Hussayn's nephew, Ibrahim Sab'awi al-Hassan, who was killed by a U.S. drone strike on May 19th, also held a responsible position in IS.³

Still, the context and temporality of these individuals' jihadist engagement have yet to be determined. Hajji Bakr's name is now well known to the public following *Der*

1 Since February 2014 Abu Muhannad al-Suwaydawi has been presented by the Iraqi authorities as Abu Ayman al-'Iraqi, one of IS's senior leaders in Syria. In reality, however, they are two different people. The photo of Abu Muhannad al-Suwaydawi has been widely disseminated. Many sources – as much among moderate Syrian rebels as IS fighters – confirmed that they were unable to recognise Abu Ayman al-'Iraqi, who would be much younger than the individual in the photo, which was also taken almost ten years since the incarceration of Abu Muhannad al-Suwaydawi by U.S. forces.

2 This might also apply to other IS leaders, namely Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, Abu 'Ali al-Anbari, Abu Ahmad al-'Alwani and Abu Fatima al-Jahishi, but to date no credible source, including within the current Iraqi government, can categorically confirm their former affiliation with Saddam Hussayn's army.

3 At the age of 32 Ibrahim Sab'awi was too young to serve as a senior official of IS – or, for that matter, within the Ba'th regime, which was eradicated 12 years earlier by the U.S.

Spiegel's April 18th article by Christoph Reuter entitled, "The terror strategist: secret files reveal the structure of Islamic State".⁴ However, it is surprising to see the striking similarity between this article, which is based on a document attributed to Hajji Bakr and brandished by the Syrian rebels, and the article published by *The Guardian*⁵ on June 15th 2014 which describes the contents of 160 USB keys recovered by the Iraqi army in Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Bilawi's hideout, the second-in-command of IS. In both cases, therefore, we are presented with documents that were found by enemies of IS and whose disclosure would substantially threaten the organisation's survival, because they describe its functioning while demonstrating the opportunism and non-religiosity of its leaders.

Therefore, following *The Guardian's* surprise at the sophistication of the IS intelligence services, which have an evaluation grid of their own informers in Iraqi institutions, it was *Der Spiegel's* turn more than a year later to seem baffled by the methods applied by Hajji Bakr. However, such methods as recruiting informants under the cover of the office for "religious preaching" or social outreach, and identifying the vulnerabilities of potential allies and especially the weaknesses of enemies are not uncommon tactics for organisations seeking to look like a legitimate state. By the same token, marrying women from powerful Syrian families or influential tribes in the region is a rather old strategy embraced by jihadist groups, be it the foreign fighters of al-Qa'ida in Mesopotamia who marry the daughters of Iraqi Sunni tribes, or al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb and in northern Mali who take young Tuareg women as wives.

The myth of the Ba'thist conspiracy against global jihad

Another debatable point in *Der Spiegel's* article – and to a certain extent in *The Guardian's* – is the desire to absolutely minimise the IS leaders' religious beliefs in an effort to avoid any association between this terrorist group and the Muslim faith. Such a portrayal echoes the narrative of al-Qa'ida rebels, which views the leaders of IS as agents of a "conspiracy against global jihad". According to this conspiracy theory, which was initially developed by al-Qa'ida sympathisers and later supported by moderate "Syrian rebels",⁶ this "anti-jihad conspiracy" supposedly started in 2010 shortly after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the head of IS, which according to them coincides with the emerging power of former Ba'thist officers in the jihadist organisation, namely Hajji Bakr. As per this narrative, on

taking control, the "Machiavellian Hajji Bakr" rid the IS of all former members of al-Qa'ida and placed "Ba'thist agents" in key positions. This fantastical account of the Iraqisation of jihad in Mesopotamia – an initiative initially led by foreign jihadists – can be contradicted by a brief analysis of the militant journey of Hajji Bakr and Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Bilawi, who had become highly influential jihadists even before Zarqawi's pledge of allegiance to Ussama bin Ladin in October 2004.

Hajji Bakr's journey has many points in common with that of 'Adnan Isma'il Najm, a former captain of the Republican Guard better known as Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Bilawi. The latter had also joined the jihadist current since the very early months of the Iraqi insurrection. He was killed on June 4th 2014 and was praised in a funeral oration by Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, the IS spokesperson, in an audio message that was broadcast the day after Mosul's⁷ capture:

Adnan Isma'il Najm, Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Bilawi al-Anbari ... was one of the first people to join the jihad against the crusaders in Mesopotamia. Compared with all the Ansar [Iraqi jihadists], he is one of their best veterans, as for "al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad", he was one of its founders. And with respect to the Islamic State, a pillar of its military command By his side was Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi. It was the encounter of the best Ansar with the best Muhajir [foreign fighter, literally "emigrant"], their friendship lasted three years during which he was imbued with his doctrine and became his right arm until his capture by the crusaders During his imprisonment, and for many years, he pursued his study of religious science, mastered the ten readings of the Qur'an, became well versed in Qur'anic interpretations and publications on the life of the Prophet, he studied lexicography, the hadith and Islamic jurisprudence.

Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Bilawi and Hajji Bakr had joined the jihadist organisation of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, which later took the name of "Tawhid wa-l-Jihad" ("Monotheism and Jihad") from the very beginning of the anti-U.S. jihad in Iraq at a time when Islamo-patriotic groups still dominated the Iraqi insurrection. These former Iraqi officers, however, do not represent all of the high-ranking leaders of IS, as demonstrated by U.S. officials' interest in Abu 'Ala al-'Afri ('Abd al-Rahman al-Qaduli), who is considered the second-in-command of IS and a potential successor to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁸ According to the information available, it appears that Abu 'Ala al-'Afri is a veteran of the Afghan

4 <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html>>.

5 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/15/iraq-isis-arrest-jihadists-wealth-power>>.

6 Close to the "moderate Islamist" component of the Syrian rebellion, the Twitter account @wikibaghdady, which presents itself as a sort of "IS Wikileaks", was often quoted as a credible source by certain media outlets, despite the inaccuracy of its information. Wikibaghdady has for a long time stated that the IS was detaining Abu 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Qatari, the amir of Jund al-Aqsa, whose body was finally found in November 2014 near Idlib in a well belonging to the moderate rebel commander Jamal Ma'aruf: <<https://twitter.com/wikibaghdady/status/453643127664803840>>.

7 For an excerpt, see <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ja-oUUAS9m0>>; the audio message is available in its entirety at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUSDfQMe7n0>>.

8 On May 5th 2015 the U.S. State Department offered a \$7 million reward for any information that could lead to the arrest of 'Abd al-Rahman Mustafa al-Qaduli, also known as Abu 'Ala al-'Afri; see <<http://m.state.gov/md241912.htm>>.

jihād against the Soviets and has always gravitated to the orbit of Iraqi jihādists, without any association with the Iraqi army or the Ba’thist ideology.

Conclusion

When discussing the role, weight and influence of Ba’thist ideology in the engagement of former officers of Saddam Hussayn in jihād, it is absolutely imperative to distinguish between two categories of subjects. The first category is that of former Ba’thist supporters who remain committed to and later became tactical allies of IS, such as ‘Izzat al-Duri, the former close aide to Saddam Hussayn and secretary-general of the Iraqi Ba’th Party.⁹ The second category consists of those officers affiliated with the Ba’th for solely personal benefit – because under Saddam Hussayn no officer could build a serious career without the party’s membership card. Most officers who joined jihādist groups in the wake of the fall of the Iraqi regime at the beginning of the U.S. occupation come from that second category of officers with weak Ba’thist convictions and high permeability to Islamist ideology, particularly following the “Return to Faith Campaign”, which was launched in 1993.¹⁰ In January 2006 most of these jihādist organisations regrouped under a single alliance, of which al-Qa’ida in Mesopotamia became the main component. A few months later, in October 2006, this alliance proclaimed the Islamic State of Iraq, thus completing one of the three objectives set forth by Zarqawi in a letter addressed to Ussama bin Ladin: establishing an Islamic state, expelling the U.S. from Mesopotamia and extending jihād to Iraq’s neighbouring countries. ■

⁹ It is worth mentioning that ‘Izzat ad-Duri has openly ended his alliance with IS by condemning the terrorism of “Daesh” in two audio messages broadcast on April 7th and May 15th 2015, respectively: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vLYeJb1hRjQ>> and <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0fhEF0SaZQ>>.

¹⁰ Saddam Hussayn officially launched this campaign in 1993 and it has mainly resulted in a sentence to prison for the consumption of alcohol in public places; greater emphasis on Qur’anic learning, especially in social circles; and, finally, the Islamisation of all state sectors, including the army and intelligence services.

■ THE AUTHOR

Romain Caillet is a researcher and consultant on Islamist issues, and a historian who specialises in global jihadist militancy (Islamic State and al-Qa'ida). He lived in the Middle East for many years: three in Cairo, two in Amman and nearly five in Beirut.

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