



## The Rise of the Caliphate

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### Executive Summary

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- \* The Islamic Caliphate declared by Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi a year ago is a most profound and defiant a challenge of Orthodox Jihadism to the Muslim World, and, to a lesser extent, to the entire modern world.
- \* The establishment of the Caliphate in mid-2014 is the inevitable outcome of the evolution of political Islam in the last half-a-century. The Caliphate is the culmination of the Jihadist doctrine introduced by Osama bin Laden and his coterie with the sole profound deviation being over relationship with Shiite Iran.
- \* In a perverse way - bin Laden will contribute far more to the evolving global Jihad movement as a martyr than he could as a leader living in seclusion. In the last months of his life, bin Laden himself realized this and he returned to visible interaction that inevitably hastened his martyrdom.
- \* In Spring 2014, the D'I'ISH decided the theological debate by introducing "the Khorasan Pledge" in the context of the history of the Jihadist struggle in the Middle East and beyond. In Summer 2014, D'I'ISH announced the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate on the territories under their control as the first step in restoring the glory of all Muslims and the liberation of all lands ever ruled by Muslims.
- \* Over the following year, the Islamic Caliphate was joined through declarations of oaths of allegiance - Bay'ah - by Jihadist leaders all over the Muslim World. The spread and ascent of the Islamic Caliphate is the outcome of an unprecedented burst of enthusiasm for Islamist-Jihadist causes throughout the entire Muslim World - including emigre communities in Western Europe and North America.
- \* The new Caliphate is the dream comes true of the entire Islamdom. As such, the idea and hope represented by the Caliphate will not go away irrespective of the fate of Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Jihadist state he established at the heart of al-Jazira.
- \* In Summer 2015, the Islamic Caliphate committed to delivering an epic spectacular strike at the heart of the US and the West. Given Baghdadi's resolve to consolidate a region-wide Islamic Caliphate and then put the Jihadist Trend on an irreversible path to global dominance - a Jihadist attempt to launch an epic spectacular strike is only a question of time.



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## About the Author of this Issue

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Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports.

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## Analysis

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A year ago, in late June 2014, the Islamic State announced the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate on the territories under their control in what used to be Syria and Iraq. The Caliphate was to be the first step in restoring the glory of all Muslims and the liberation of all lands ever ruled by Muslims. This was the first time a Caliphate was declared since Kemal Ataturk formally abolished the Ottoman Caliphate in March 1924. Moreover, such an audacious undertaking was not attempted by the Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan or the Chechens in the North Caucasus. They only established localized Emirates over lands they claimed.

In early July 2014, Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi delivered a sermon in the just captured Mosul in which he elaborated on the historic global mission of the new Islamic Caliphate and his own role as Caliph Ibrahim. Over the next year, the Islamic Caliphate was joined through declarations of oaths of allegiance - Bay'ah - by leaders of Wilayat (Provinces) in the Sinai Peninsula, central Yemen and southern Saudi Arabia, northern Libya and Tunisia, the Sahel, northeastern Nigeria, Chechnya and Ingushetia, and Khorasan (Afghanistan and the Fergana Valley). Other major Islamist-Jihadist entities and their leaders, including in the North Caucasus and Central Asia, are known to be discussing their own bay'ah with al-Baghdadi and the leaders of the Caliphate. The spread and ascent of the Islamic Caliphate is the outcome of an unprecedented burst of enthusiasm for Islamist-Jihadist causes throughout the entire Muslim World - including emigre communities in Western Europe and North America.

Throughout Islamdom, the reign of the first two Rashidun Caliphs - Prophet Muhammad's immediate successors Caliph Abu-Bakr (573-634) and Caliph Omar (577-644) - is considered the apogee of human governance and a time of near-perfection that all humans must strive to attain. The crux of the message of Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi in both word and action is "Yes, we can!" The Muslim World is capable of restoring the Caliphate of the first two Rashidun Caliphs irrespective of the sensitivities and norms of the modern world.

Thus, the new Caliphate is the dream comes true of the entire Islamdom. As such, the idea and hope represented by the Caliphate will not go away irrespective of the fate of Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Jihadist state he established at the heart of al-Jazira (eastern Syria and western Iraq in modern terms). Hence, the Islamic Caliphate declared by Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi is a most profound and defiant a challenge by Orthodox Jihadism to the Muslim World, and, to a lesser extent, to the entire modern world.

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The establishment of the Caliphate in mid-2014 is the inevitable outcome of the evolution of political Islam in the last half-a-century. The Caliphate is the obvious culmination of the Jihadist doctrine introduced by Osama bin Laden and his coterie with the sole profound deviation being over relationship with Shiite Iran (where bin Laden encouraged expedient cooperation while Baghdadi insists on irreconcilable Sunni-Shiite enmity).

Islam has always rejected the notion of a modern state and only legitimized the all-Islamic Sharia-ruled entity called the Caliphate. The rise and fall of a myriad of Islamic political entities throughout Islam's history is considered necessary reactions to prevailing circumstances rather than desirable or legitimate solutions. However, in the early-1960's, Said al-Qutb, the key luminary of modern political Islam, decreed that Islamism must accept the existing modern state with its fixed boundaries as an inescapable and unavoidable reality. The road to the utopian Caliphate, he wrote, starts with the transformation of existing states into Muslim states and then using these states as the building blocks of the Caliphate. In the early-1990's, Hassan al-Turabi, the



most important theologian of modern Jihadism, further legitimized the role of a modern Islamic state as a crucial and expedient phase in the restoration of the Caliphate under contemporary conditions. Turabi also encouraged other expedient measures - most notably close cooperation with Shiite Iran - as necessary and desirable in pursuit of the triumph of Jihad.

The foundations of the current Caliphate were laid by Osama bin Laden and his coterie in the late-1990's. Initially, bin Laden argued for the delinking of Islamdom from the West as a precondition for the establishment of genuinely Islamic system of governance based solely on the Shariah. In 2001-2, Saif al-Adel, one of bin Laden's closest aides based in Iran, wrote the practical multi-phase program for implementing the ascent of Islam called "The Working Plan Till 2020". Significantly, the fifth phase, to be implemented between 2013 and 2016, is the establishment of a Caliphate.

In 2005, the Jihadist trend underwent its most profound evolution that was prompted by the changes in the post-9/11 world. While the Jihadist supreme leadership gained theological permission to use weapons of mass destruction at the heart of the West even though they inflict immense casualties - the leadership decided against their use for fear of Western retribution against the radicalized Muslim communities at the heart of the West. There followed a soul-searching cognizance of the growing diversity of other Jihadist foci worldwide that led to the establishment of regional entities commonly known as the regional "al-Qaida's". The mere recognition of the diversity of the Jihadist sub-movements challenged the viability of a global all-Islamic Caliphate.

In mid-2010, Saif al-Adel led a small group of Jihadist thinkers from Iran to rejoin bin Laden's Shura Kabira in Pakistan. They argued that the Jihadist trend can be sustained only if its doctrine became more prudent and pragmatic. With the Arab World on the verge of major upheaval, the Jihadist trend must abandon the quest for a utopian Caliphate and focus instead on supporting individual Intifada's in specific Arab states. Bin Laden accepted the arguments of Saif al-Adel and ordered the establishment of the "Son of the Land" program to launch, support and sustain these Intifada's - known to the West as the "Arab Spring".

In Summer 2012, the Jihadists interpreted their imminent triumph in Afghanistan and Pakistan, coupled with the ascent of Iran, as the beginning of the fateful "End-of-Time Battle" for the Middle East. According to the Sayings attributed to Prophet Muhammad, the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Khorasan (which encompasses the Central Asian republics, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir and Iran) would create conducive conditions for Islam's triumph in the "End-of-Time Battle". According to the Prophet's Sayings, Jihadist forces would then arrive in the Middle East from the East and wage the fateful victorious battle for the liberation of Bilad al-Sham and al-Jazira, and the establishment of the Mosque of al-Aqsa in Jerusalem (Islam's original Qiblah - that is, the direction of prayers - in 610-623) as the center of a new Caliphate.

In early 2014, Jihadist leaders in al-Jazira concluded that the aggregate success of the Sunni forces provides for expediting the "End-of-Time Battle" by establishing a Caliphate that will spearhead the fateful Jihad. In late-April, they escalated the theological struggle by introducing "the Khorasan Pledge" that focused on the pursuit of Takfiri neo-Salafi Jihad and the rejection of cooperation with Shiite Iran. Drastic steps were imperative because "al-Qaida deviated from the rightful course." Nine prominent al-Qaida Emirs from the Middle East, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran declared their allegiance to the new Emir of the Faithful Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Qurashi - the Emir of DI'ISH. Ultimately, the tenets of "the Khorasan Pledge" amount to going back to the Jihadist tenets as introduced by bin Laden a decade ago. This explains the great popularity and acceptance of the calls for Jihad and Caliphate.



On 29 June 2014, DI'ISH announced the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate on the territories under their control as the first step in restoring the glory of all Muslims and the liberation of all lands ever ruled by Muslims. DI'ISH explained that one of their priorities is to smash the "partitioning of Muslim lands by Crusader powers" in the aftermath of the First World War in order to create a new Middle East. Only the abolishment of modern Arab states and the creation of an Islamic Caliphate in their stead will permit the restoration of Muslim glory and dignity. "The Jihadist Imam al-Baghdadi was designated the Caliph of the Muslims" and would be henceforth referred to as "Khalifah Ibrahim." Al-Baghdadi "has accepted this allegiance, and has thus become the leader for Muslims everywhere." Since then, the forces of the Caliphate have been on the offensive throughout al-Jazira and neighboring regions.

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The best manifestation of the strength and popularity of the message of the Caliphate is the rapid emergence of localized Caliphates that swear allegiance to al-Baghdadi.

The first followers were the Emirs of the Jama'ats in the Northern Caucasus and Crimea. Already in Spring 2014 they acted on the message and zeal brought back by veterans of the Jihad in Syria and Iraq. They brought new enthusiasm to the anti-Russian Jihad at the time when the Russian-supported revival of Sufism all but defeated the al-Qaida-affiliated Emirate of the Caucasus. It would take more than a year for Takfiri Jihadism to consolidate in the North Caucasus. In Winter 2014/15, at least three Chechen and three Dagestani senior commanders, as well as numerous lower-rank commanders, pledged their bay'ah to al-Baghdadi. Only at the onset of Ramadan 2015, Emir Khamzat (Aslan Byutukayev), the leader of the Caucasus Emirate's Chechnya Province - the most important Jihadist entity outside Afghanistan-Pakistan - finally announced "the oaths of allegiance of the Emirs of Chechnya and Ingushetia" to Baghdadi and the Islamic Caliphate. The oath of allegiance covers the 15,000 mujahedin under his command.

Most important has been the impact of the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate in the Maghreb, the Sahel, and ultimately the areas controlled by the Boko Haram. Since early 2014, local leaders repeatedly tried to reconcile between Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on the basis of theological discourse about the relative merits of both the pursuit of Jihadist orthodoxy and expedient pragmatism. Ultimately, they sided with the imperative to pursue Takfiri Jihad at all cost and gradually transformed their respective "liberated zones" into local Caliphates loyal to al-Baghdadi. The Boko Haram's Abu Bakr Shekau was recognized as a viable Caliph and his theological teachings have been cited by al-Baghdadi and his acolytes. Starting Spring 2015, Jihadist communiques refer to the Boko Haram as "The Islamic State's West Africa Province" and part of the "Islamic State in West Africa." One of the communiques explained that Baghdadi's Caliphate was becoming a global movement encompassing provinces all over the Muslim World.

Subsequently, several other Jihadist entities throughout the Middle East and South Asia have declared their allegiance to al-Baghdadi and the Caliphate.

By early Summer 2015, even the most stalwart supporters of al-Qaida in the Middle East were acknowledging that Zawahiri's al-Qaida was becoming irrelevant to the regional turmoil. The Islamic Caliphate has taken over the Jihad previously identified with bin Laden. The leading al-Qaida-affiliated Jihadist theologians worry that the decline of Zawahiri's standing and influence in the region is a reflection of the overall decay of al-Qaida. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, one of the most influential Jihadist scholars alive, warns that al-Qaida's organizational structure has "collapsed". Zawahiri, he notes, "operates solely based on allegiance. There is no



organizational structure. There is only communication channels, and loyalty.” Although Abu Muhammad al-Maqqadi is loath to acknowledge this - his brother Abdulaziz al-Maqqadi is one of the original authors of the “Khorasan Pledge”.

In Summer 2015, the Islamic Caliphate committed to delivering an epic spectacular strike at the heart of the US and the West. This apocalyptic strike will start the demise of the West and the unstoppable ascent of Islam to global dominance. The *raison d’être* for this strike is not different from that of Osama bin Laden a decade beforehand - in the mid-2000’s. For bin Laden, the paramount challenge was coercing the US-led West into abandoning the pro-Western leaders and administrations in Muslim lands. “The focus should be on killing and fighting the American people and their representatives,” he wrote. The only way to force such a change in US policy, bin Laden stressed, is to “start striking America to force it to abandon these [pro-US] rulers and leave the Muslims alone.” Bin Laden argued then, as Baghdadi does now, that only a spectacular apocalyptic strike and horrific punishment can coerce the West into withdrawing from and abandoning Islamdom. Given Baghdadi’s resolve to consolidate a region-wide Islamic Caliphate and then put the Jihadist Trend on an irreversible path to global dominance - a Jihadist attempt to launch an epic spectacular strike is only a question of time.

Significantly, official Washington now accepts that the Caliphate’s threat is real. In mid-June 2015, the Obama Administration finally conceded that the Islamic State obtained enough radioactive materials to develop dirty bombs. Some 40kg of uranium compounds were seized in Mosul alone. The Obama Administration also acknowledged that the Jihadist “Attack America” plan was working. The Caliphate’s “sophisticated social media campaign” is reaching a huge supportive audience in the United States - building a large recruitment pool of would-be terrorists. Moreover, the on-line and via-recruiter training and assistance in obtaining expertise, as well as key pieces of equipment and components, for improvised bomb making keep improving markedly. This reduces the need of aspirant Jihadist martyr bombers to search for outside expertise and help - which has so far been the FBI’s primary method of ensnaring aspirant terrorists via entrapments. Hence, the Obama Administration conceded, there exists in the United States a rapidly expanding group of potential terrorists - probably in the thousands - that are largely unknown to the FBI.

On 21 June, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee Rep. Devin Nunes (R-Calif) warned that the United States is dealing with “the highest threat level we have ever faced in this country.” The rise and spread of networks comprised of self-radicalized Islamic States supporters are of unprecedented zeal and quality, and consequently, the security authorities “are having a tough time tracking [these] terrorist cells within the United States.” Nunes concurred that it is becoming impossible to protect the public against all possible threats. “It’s just tough to secure those types of areas if you have someone who wants to blow themselves up or open fire or other threats of that nature and we just don’t know or can track all of the bad guys that are out there today,” he acknowledged.

Ultimately, it takes only very few tightly knit aspirant Jihadists to strike out. The Jihadist analysis of the Texas attack, where the two terrorists were killed before they could do any harm, stresses and hails the noble intentions of all Jihadists irrespective of their ultimate failure. The two martyrs “took it upon themselves to remind the enemies of Allah and His Messenger ... that as long as they choose to wage war on Islam, they would have no peace,” a Caliphate commentary explains. “Their determination to support the cause of Allah and punish those who insult the Prophet ... should serve as inspiration to those residing in the lands of the Crusaders who are still hesitant to perform their duty.” It is only a question of time before more American and



European Jihadists attempt to embrace martyrdom. Sooner, rather than later, some of them will be provided with weapons of mass destruction.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

This paper is based on, and extracted from, the far larger analysis *After Osama bin Laden and in the Aftermath of the Khorasan Pledge*, ISPSW Strategy Series, no. 359, June 2015.