UNEXAMINED CONSEQUENCES: LEADERSHIP DECAPITATION AND THE RISE OF ISIL

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The tactic of leadership decapitation has become a crucial component of Western counter-terrorism policy. It has been used to great effect in the wars against Al-Qaeda (AQ), its affiliates, and the so-called Islamic State (ISIL) resulting in the deaths of crucial military, spiritual, and administrative figures. Whether by drone, special forces, or airstrike, eliminating terrorist leaders can decimate command and control structures, demoralize personnel, and shatter organizational cohesion. Charismatic leaders are a special subset of organizational leaders that typically enjoy a symbolic power that can mobilize supporters towards action and bind a group together despite extraordinary internal (e.g., intra-organizational rivalries) and external (e.g., military strikes) forces. It would seem, at least on the surface, that there could be no better example of when the strategy of leadership decapitation should be deployed than when it targets charismatic leaders. Unfortunately, the inadvertent drawbacks of leadership decapitation are complex, multifaceted, and rarely understood.

To explore these dynamics, this article analyzes how on two occasions – first with the death of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi in 2006 and then Osama Bin Laden in 2011 – leadership decapitation inadvertently contributed to ISIL's rise to prominence. It begins by examining the role of Abu Umar Al-Baghdadi's leadership of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in the vacuum left by Zarqawi's death. It argues that contrary to the conventional wisdom, Abu Umar played a crucial role in stabilizing an organisation that had not only been rocked by the loss of its leader but, perhaps more importantly, had been struggling to deal with the strategic and organizational volatility that was inherent to Zarqawi's leadership. In contrast to this quite overt example of the direct impact leadership decapitation had on ISIL's intra-organizational dynamics, the next example is more opaque and highlights the broader inter-organizational dynamics that may be impacted by this strategy. It explores how Bin Laden's death not only removed a cohesive force from a fracturing Al-Qaeda but created a vacuum at the apex of the global *jihad*. Bin Laden's charisma and prestige in the transnational *jihadist* milieu long suppressed the ideological and strategic tensions in Al-Qaeda brewing since its inception. His removal released tensions which ISIL later leveraged in order to emerge as the new 'face' of global *jihad* and simultaneously heirs of Bin Laden's legacy and his limitations. The two case studies explored here provide very different examples of the unintended multi-level consequences of removing a charismatic leader and highlight important considerations for assessing the pros and cons of leadership decapitation as a counterterrorism strategy.

The Zarqawi Vacuum: Enter the 'Faceless Man'

After two years of bloody war in Iraq, it was clear that the transnational *jihadist* milieu had a new star: Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. The image Zarqawi portrayed to the world was of a young and brash field commander, as pious as he was brave, and utterly ruthless in his efforts to punish the occupiers and their local allies. He was more than a mere symbolic figure. As the founder of the movement he led, Zarqawi played an integral role in the recruitment of its members, the formation of its strategy and doctrine, and was the star attraction in its propaganda.[1] The meteoric rise of Zarqawi's small group reached its zenith with the merger of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) with a handful of Salafist militant groups under the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC) in the midst of a full-fledged civil war.

Zarqawi's performance on center stage would not last forever. By 2006 external and internal forces were placing extraordinary pressures on the movement to address growing concerns about his leadership. The tendency for Zarqawi and his men to brutally implement their system of control and reject (if not simply eliminate) traditional tribal authorities caused acute tensions with local populations while inter-resistance rivalries, fuelled by economic and territorial disputes, began bubbling over.[2] Extreme violence was the tool of choice for Zarqawi and his men to deal with these tensions fuelled by their *takfirist* proclivities.[3] Zarqawi and his men were increasingly depicted as 'foreigners' by their rivals while others chastised Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda's senior leadership for supporting them.[4] While Zarqawi responded by playing a less prominent

role in propaganda releases, at the behest of the Shura Council, the fundamental issue of how to address the Zarqawi problem remained. There was a growing urgency within the MSC to address these issues and Zarqawi was soon sidelined by the Shura council. 'The Stranger,' as he illustratively was known, was now seen more as a liability than an asset for a nascent Iraqi Islamic State.[5] Then, in the summer of 2006, Zarqawi was killed in an airstrike. Zarqawi's killing must have seemed a blessing for the Shura council but the fundamental dilemma remained: who could step into the vacuum created by Zarqawi's death and lead the movement through this tumultuous yet critical period in its evolution? Four months later the Shura council announced a new alliance known as the 'scented ones' and the first emir of the new Islamic State of Iraq: Abu Umar Al Baghdadi. Among the many surprising aspects of this new development was that few outside the organization seemed to even recognize this name.[6]

The New Emir – Abu Umar al Hussayni al Qureshi al Baghdadi

The Shura council's choice of a highly skilled bureaucrat respected across the movement is telling. It suggests a deep awareness of the organizational and leadership capabilities required after the loss of a charismatic figure like Zarqawi. A significant portion of the study of charismatic leadership is devoted to understanding 'routinization,' which broadly refers to how an organization or movement normalizes activities for the long term following the loss of a charismatic leader. Weber's seminal theory describes charismatic leadership as the formation of leader-follower bonds based on emotion. In contrast, 'legal-rational' authority is based on 'rules' (e.g., election by members or selection by a panel) while 'traditional' authority is based on long-held custom.

The transition from Zarqawi to Abu Umar represented a transition from a charismatic to a legal-rational basis of authority and implies that the leadership council desired stability – a steadying hand to build for the future.[7]

Abu Umar's career progression through AQI reads like that of any successful public or private sector bureaucrat: the successful leadership of a small rival followed by recruitment, a few middle management roles, then a jump into senior management based on strong performances. A local insurgent leader in the Euphrates River town of Haditha, Hamid al Zawi's Sunni resistance group sheltered Zarqawi on several occasions before Abu Umar was asked to join AQI by two legendary Zarqawi lieutenants, Abu Anas al Shami and Abu Muhammad al Lubnani. Abu Umar progressed from local leader in Haditha to Baghdad's security manager, to the Sharia committee, to the emir of Diyala

US soldiers in Fallujah (below) were the main target of Zarqawi and Al-Qaeda in Iraq. (Image credit: Photographer's Mate 2nd Class Philip Forrest, US Navy.)

province, before serving as chief of staff for the entire organization. Moreover, Abu Umar represented the growing Iraqi membership of what had originally been a group of mostly foreigners fighting the occupation and Iraqi government. Claiming Qureshi[8] tribal ties from Anbar, Abu Umar reminded his audience: "I have drunk from the waters of the Euphrates. I was raised on its dates and I grew up on its banks."[9] Beyond this advantage, Abu Umar skills in laying the organizational, administrative, and strategic foundations would prove crucial for a movement that would eventually rip through the Fertile Crescent in 2014.

Reinforcing the primacy of his 'legal-rational' leadership status, Abu Omar's biography, written by a well-connected follower not long after his death, emphasizes his administrative expertise over his military experiences.[10] This in itself offers a telling insight into his influence. For example, AQI's reorganization from regional bureaus into the types of structures that have come to characterise ISIL's politico-military system find their roots in the post-Zarqawi period. RAND's analysis of captured documents relating to ISIL's bureaucracy between 2005 and 2010 reveal a surprising level of administrative sophistication that are too readily ignored as a factor of what led to their success in 2014.[11] Abu Umar's value as an administrator is empirically supported by primary sources and secondary source accounts. However, one would be mistaken to dismiss the appeal of his personal attributes and qualities as a communicator. A member of the Iraqi security services explained to one of the authors that Abu Umar often had a magnetic quality, especially amongst rank and file members, that is underappreciated due to the trying times of his reign, and the fact that he "was killed before he could show this part of himself." From naming military operations as a means to align them with the broader campaign strategy to the adoption of his oft repeated phrase

'the Islamic State is remaining…' as part of the movement's motto provides some insights into the unseen dimensions of the 'faceless man's' leadership. While Abu Umar and Abu Hamza were killed together in a 2010 raid, the significant momentum and increase in attacks seen in 2011[12] signify the importance of these leaders to the organization's survival – much to our collective detriment.

The structural reforms implemented by Abu Umar reinforced the movement's organizational resilience while laying the foundations for its extraordinary resurgence merely three years later. Yet the collapse of the Islamic State of Iraq could have meant the extinguishment of the politico-military strategy that underpinned it. After all, senior Al-Qaeda leadership had repeatedly warned against the premature declaration of an Islamic State. This was an issue of great contention amongst *jihadist* groups because it concerned the legitimate *manhaj* (methodology) for using politico-military actions in that pursuit. As captured documents have subsequently revealed, it was an ideological and strategic point of contention that dogged Al Qaeda and for whom Osama Bin Laden had played an important symbolic and practical role in buffering. This would change with the Abbottabad raid.

The Bin Laden Vacuum: Enter the Caliphate and its Caliph

The scholarly field broadly agrees that the emotion-based bonds (i.e., charisma) that define the charismatic leader-follower relationship form due to the belief that the leader's personal attributes are extraordinary *and* their proposed, inevitably radical, agenda is vital to alleviating perceived crises. There are few who would disagree that Bin Laden generated a powerful charismatic appeal. Exuding an image of piety, courage, and humility, Bin Laden had a deep appreciation for how the media could be used to construct and propagate his image and message. Moreover, Al-Qaeda

was a mechanism by which Bin Laden was able to not only operationalize that message into actions – typically simultaneous multi-target, mass-casualty terrorist attacks – but a means to spread his charisma globally. Al-Qaeda's senior leadership considered then Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar as the Commander of the Faithful[13] but it was undoubtedly Bin Laden who was the face of transnational *jihadism*. Indeed, despite an extraordinary manhunt forcing him underground, Bin Laden was still able to sustain his charisma and prestige amongst *jihadists* to varying degrees. The 2011 Abbottabad raid which killed Bin Laden represented an enormously symbolic victory in the so-called War on Terror. Ayman Al-Zawahiri emerged as Bin Laden's replacement. Ageing, unpopular, and seemingly the antithesis of charisma, Zawahiri symbolized the impact of Bin Laden's removal on Al-Qaeda. But Bin Laden's death would have repercussions beyond Al-Qaeda central and its affiliates. Bin Laden's death created a vacuum at the apex of the global *jihad*. Despite it being a largely symbolic status, it was a tremendously powerful mantle in not only the battle for 'hearts and minds' but the strategic preferences of militant Islamist groups.

Charismatic leadership theory suggests that the removal of a charismatic leader, especially one as powerful as Bin Laden, will likely result in remaining members and rival factions competing to leverage the former leader's legacy and charismatic capital for their own ends – routinization in its many forms. Bin Laden's death triggered both a vacuum at the apex of the global *jihadist* milieu and the bubbling over of long festering tensions about the legitimate *manhaj* to achieve an Islamic state. Captured documents from the Abbottabad raid reveal two major dimensions of this *manhaj* debate. Firstly, Bin Laden's private correspondence seemed to focus heavily on his concern that local *jihadi* groups were killing too many Muslims and domestic attacks should be replaced

with targeting the United States instead.[14] Secondly, the failures of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) disturbed Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda's senior leadership rendering them reluctant to support affiliates, like Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, who wished to declare an Islamic state or formally accept the *bayat* of groups like Al Shabab that had implemented systems of government that were deemed substandard.[15]

Whether Islamist groups should prioritize attacks against Western over local targets and under what conditions an Islamic State can be legitimately declared are both strategic and jurisprudential issues. The *manhaj* issue is not just about politico-military efficacy but legitimacy. The Abbottabad letters reveal that there was varying degrees of disagreement not only within Al-Qaeda central but across the broader spectrum of formal Al-Qaeda affiliates and informally associated groups. The Abbottabad letters reveal that Bin Laden was regularly engaged in trying to mediate these tensions and, while it is difficult to assess conclusively given the limited amount of primary source information available, his standing within the global *jihadist* milieu must have helped to abate them. While this may be open to debate, what is not is what happened after Bin Laden died. When Baghdadi declared the expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq into Syria, thus the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), these underlying tensions spilled over into a very public propaganda war with Al-Qaeda that soon became violent. While Al-Qaeda and its Syrian affiliate Jabhat Al-Nusra stated that ISIL did not have the authority to declare an Islamic State, ISIL responded with counter-narratives that often leveraged Bin Laden's legacy as a source of legitimacy for their claims.

The root of the ISIL and Al-Qaeda/Jabhat Al-Nusra split can be viewed through the lens of the post-Bin Laden (i.e., post-charismatic leader) vacuum and the ensuing process of routinization. The second video of a 2014 nine-part ISIL-

produced series titled *The Establishment of the Islamic State* features Bin Laden praising the 2006 founding of the Islamic State in Iraq.[16] The overt and implicit messaging is clear: we had Bin Laden's approval then, it follows that we would have it now, and therefore we are the new champions of his legacy and vision. This was further reinforced by videos featuring respected figures such as Al-Zarqawi,[17] Anwar Al-Awlaki,[18] Abu Hamza Al-Muhajir,[19] and Abu Umar Al-Baghdadi;[20] the underlying message was the same. Typical of ISIL's counter-narrative strategy, which is to respond to the criticisms of rivals with waves of defensive messaging, ISIL released several speeches spearheaded by its spokesman Abu Muhamad Al-Adnani all heralding the politico-military, strategic, and ideological legitimacy of their *manhaj* and condemning Al-Qaeda for deviating from the methodology of not just Bin Laden but the Prophet Muhammad himself.[21] For example, in 'Apologies, Amir of Al-Qaidah,' ISIL's jurisprudential and strategic case against Al-Qaeda is methodically laid out for its audience.[22]

Having leveraged Bin Laden's legacy in its effort to legitimise its agenda, ISIL now sought to fill the vacuum at the apex of the global *jihad*. Charismatic leadership is, by its very nature, volatile and ephemeral. Despite Bin Laden's charismatic appeal, his leadership had been dogged by his distinct *lack* of religious authority. Indeed Bin Laden had frequently been criticised for *fatwas* that he had little to no religious authority to produce. Consequently, while Bin Laden may have been considered by many supporters as a strong Muslim politico-military leader, he would have been perceived by very few as a religious authority. When ISIL declared the establishment of its Caliphate in 2014, it also presented to the *ummah* a Caliph that, at least according to ISIL's proclamations, all Muslims were obliged to support.[23] Once again, in the aftermath of a charismatic leader being removed, on this occasion Bin Laden, ISIL sought to establish a legal-rational

basis for the authority of its leader. Of course, the Qureshi-tied Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi had been selected by ISI's shura council as Abu Umar's replacement years earlier. Abu Bakr's doctorate in Islamic jurisprudence underscored the legal-rational basis of his authority overcoming a vital shortcoming in Bin Laden's leadership. Moreover, for as long as the Caliph has his Caliphate, the fundamental legal-rational basis of his authority in the eyes of many supporters remains intact. By viewing these dynamics through the lens of charismatic leadership and its routinization, this case study has sought to provide a unique interpretive lens through which to not only conceptualize ISIL's skilful political manoeuvrings but the complex repercussions of leadership decapitation beyond the immediate organization.

Conclusion

This article has explored two very different examples of how leadership decapitation may have inadvertently contributed to ISIL's successes in 2014. From the first study it is possible to draw direct causal links between Zarqawi's death and the rise of a brilliant organizational leader in Abu Umar Al-Baghdadi who, in his brief tenure, laid the core administrative, organizational, and strategic foundations for the movement that would later sweep through eastern Syria and large areas of Iraq, and inspire *wilayats* around the world. However, leadership decapitation can have more than just intra-organizational repercussions and while direct causal linkages are less clear the ramifications can be equally significant. Bin Laden's death created a significant vacuum within the global *jihadist* milieu that, inevitably, factions and groups attempted to fill by leveraging his charismatic capital. While it is impossible to forecast events if Bin Laden had not died, his death and the ensuing vacuum was leveraged by ISIL to their advantage. As charismatic leadership theory suggests, affiliates and rivals jockeyed to become the champions of his tremendous legacy as a platform to

promote their own interests. At least in the short-term, it seems ISIL's was most successful. ∎

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Notes

1. See Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (Doubleday, 2015).

2. Nibras Kazimi, "Jihadist Meltdown," *New York Sun*, 12 March 2007, http://www.nysun.com/opinion/jihadist-meltdown/50244/.

3. For one example of many, see the ISI document: "Incident Comment from the ISI Ministry of Defense," dated 2 June 2007, Harmony Document NMEC-2007-637011, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/incident-comment-from-the-isi-ministry-of-defense-dated-622007-english-translation-2.

4. Will McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse; The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (St. Martin's Press, 2015), p. 36.

5. Bouchaib Silm, "Jihadis in Iraq: Did al Zarqawi resign?" *IDSS Commentaries* (S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 20 April 2006), https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/781-jihadis-in-iraq-did-al-zarqaw/#.V1ncsHrNJ4x.

6. Hamid Dawud Muhammad Khalil al Zawi changed his nom de guerre several times during his AQI career, most likely for security reasons (for more details, refer to the biography in note 9). He was never one of the leaders of the major groups that joined AQI and served under Zarqawi's deputy Abu Hamza, and for these two reasons he was relatively unknown. He chose the name Abu Umar al Baghdadi when announced as the emir, likely a reference to one of the first four rightly guided caliphs, or Rashidun. Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, his successor, did the same after taking over the organization. Abu Bakr was originally known as Abu Dua.

7. In Abu Umar's first speech, he emphasized in great detail the role of an expanded shura council with representation from all the united resistance groups and tribes with enhanced decision making powers. See "Truth has Come and Falsehood has Vanished," December 2006, http://triceratops.brynmawr.edu:8080/dspace/handle/10066/14483.

8. The Qureshi tribe was the prominent tribe in Mecca during the time of the prophet, and Islamic State movement literature suggest that a caliph or proto caliph must have a tribal background from this extended family. See the Nibras Kazimi, "The Caliphate Attempted," The Hudson Institute's Current Trends in Islamic Ideology, http://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/1137/20080701_kazimicaliphateattempted.pdf.

9. Abu Umar al Baghdadi statement, "Pledging to Prevent Elections," http://triceratops.brynmawr.edu/dspace/handle/10066/5032.

10. Abu Usama al Iraqi, "Stages of the Jihad of Amir al Baghdadi," posted 12 May 2012 on Global Jihad Network. Translation available at https://whitesidenwc.wordpress.com.

11. Patrick Johnson, Jacob Shapiro, Howard Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle Jung, Patrick Ryan, Jonathan Wallace, *Foundations of the Islamic State; Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005-2010* (RAND Corporation, 2016), http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1192.html.

12. For the significant increase in activities by 2011, see Brian Fishman's "Redefining the Islamic State: The Fall and Rise of Al Qaeda in Iraq," New America Foundation (August 2011), https://www.newamerica.org/documents/886/redefining-the-islamic-state.

13. SOCOM-2012-0000007: 1, http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/SOCOM-2012-0000007-Trans.pdf.

14. For more see N. Lahoud, S. Caudill, L. Collins, G. Koehler-Derrick, D. Rassler, M. al-'Ubaydi, *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin sidelines?* (Harmony Program, The Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, 2012).

15. Ibid, especially pp. 22-28.

16. *The Establishment of the Islamic State, Part 2*, Al-I'tisām Media, http://jihadology.net/2013/12/25/al-iti%e1%b9%a3am-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-series-of-the-life-from-the-words-of-the-ulama-on-the-project-of-th/.

17. *The Establishment of the Islamic State, Part 9*, Al-I'tisām Media, http://jihadology.net/2014/04/26/al-iti%e1%b9%a3am-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-series-of-the-life-from-the-words-of-the-ulama-on-the-project-of-th-7/.

18. *The Establishment of the Islamic State, Part 1*, Al-I'tisām Media, http://jihadology.net/2013/12/10/al-iti%e1%b9%a3am-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-series-of-the-life-from-the-words-of-the-ulama-on-the-project-of-the-islamic-stat/.

19. *The Establishment of the Islamic State, Part 7*, Al-I'tisām Media, http://jihadology.net/2014/03/21/al-iti%e1%b9%a3am-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-series-of-the-life-from-the-words-of-the-ulama-on-the-project-of-th-6/.

20. *The Establishment of the Islamic State, Part 4*, Al-I'tisām Media, http://jihadology.net/2014/02/08/al-iti%e1%b9%a3am-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-series-of-the-life-from-the-words-of-the-ulama-on-the-project-of-th-3/.

21. A. Al-'Adnani, "They Shall By No Means Harm you but With a Slight Evil," Fursan Al-Balagh Media Translation Section, 2013, http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/shaykh-abc5ab-mue1b8a5ammad-al-e28098adnc481nc4ab-al-shc481mc4ab-22they-will-not-harm-you-except-for-some-annoyance22-en.pdf; A. Al'Adnani, "Apologies, Amir of Al-Qaidah," Al-Furqan Media Foundation, 2014, https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/05/12/new-audio-message-by-isis-shaykh-abu-muhammad-al-adnani-as-shami-apologies-amir-al-qaida/; A. Al-'Adnani, "This Is Not Our Methodology nor Will It Ever Be," https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/shaykh-abc5ab-mue1b8a5ammad-al-e28098adnc481nc4ab-al-shc481mc4ab-22this-is-not-our-manhaj-nor-will-it-ever-be22-en.pdf; A. Al'Adnani, "This Is the Promise of Allah," 2014, http://triceratops.brynmawr.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10066/14242/ADN20140629.pdf?sequence=1.

22. A. Al'Adnani, "Apologies, Amir of Al-Qaidah," Al-Furqan Media Foundation, 2014, https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/05/12/new-audio-message-by-isis-shaykh-abu-muhammad-al-adnani-as-shami-apologies-amir-al-qaida/.

23. A. Baghdadi (Caliph Ibrahim), *A message to the mujahidin and the Muslim ummah in the month of Ramadan* (Al Hayat Media Centre, 2014), http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/documents/baghdadi-caliph.pdf.