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Tells the Facts, Names the Names

In Memoriam X 7: The Late, Late al Baghdadi

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November 1, 2019

Abdullah Rashid al-Baghdadi, the much-feared talking beard of the (former) Caliphate of Iraq and the Levant has been killed for approximately the seventh time, on Oct 27, 2017. In memoriam also, Special Forces hound (name still classified), who died while pursuing this villain, like Lassie of yore.

The Caliph was/is a polarizing figure: for Ayman al-Zawahari, al Qaeda CEO & TV personality; in the halls of the Pentagon & its actionable HUMINT; in the eyes of Syriac Mukhabarat. He was a presence in the satellite battlefields of all interested parties and in the glossy pages of ISIS' voguish Dabiq – and most recently for the wily Russians, who also claimed his head ('...though the West is skeptical', Reuters, c. 2015). 2 days ago, the US announced that al Baghdadi is certainly dead. Trump himself, the fearsome al Zayim al Amerika, has claimed responsibility, though other reports say suicide.

This Ibn Fantomas was everywhere and nowhere. Abdullah Rashid al-Baghdadi watched and played the sharp strings of his modern-day hashasheen from a digital Alamut nearby the old Sykes-Picot fault line. A dark horse with a Rolex, a conductor of the wretched poor over spires of Saud, he was never short of cash. Or brand new Adidas for his cadres. Like untaxed wealth, he seemed to hail from the magic isles.

He apparently held a degree or two, proof of his erudition in jurisprudence and philosophy. Was he always so brilliant? Was he at al Azhar, al Harvard or the LSE? The Cato Institute or School of the Americas?

He was once apparently captured by the US, during the formative years of the Iraq Occupation. They let him go. They bought him? Just as Isis followed Osiris down the river, al Baghdadi would travel to the Western Lands.

He stood on a balcony like Mussolini played by Omar Sharif (or Ismael Yasmine):



His pronouncements are studied by thinktanks and talk show hosts all over the American Republic. Knowledgeable men speak his name, maybe even with the appropriate gh; rhotic in guttural – ħ – as in Baghdad, his hometown (apparently), a would-be Harun al Rashid crossed with a Golan-Globus ninja flick.

Yet al Baghdadi did not exist per se. He was voiced by actor Abu Abdullah an Nai'ma, according to Brigadier General Kevin J Bergner, National Security Council staff, Special Assistant to the President, and Senior Director for Iraq.

Various doubles of the Caliph have been sighted, multiple stand-ins to draw enemy fire à la the late Saddam Hussein and the present late Jeff Bezos.

Former CIA official Bruce Reidel: “First, they say we have killed him,” (he is referring to statements by several Iraqi government officials), “then we heard of him after his death and now they are saying he never existed. That suggests that our intelligence on Al Qaeda in Iraq is not what we want it to be.” But Al Qaeda (In Iraq?) is not ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh. Or is it? Is he perhaps thinking of the Al-Nusra Front? (who are our allies – or were, when they were allied with the Free Syrian Army (which is not ‘jihadist’)). So what exactly would Reidel like this ‘intelligence’ to ‘be’?

Al Baghdadi is a Rashomon Effect: All versions of him are equally true. We know him as the Caliph; we know him as an anonymous actor with another actor’s voice, via the ISIS film studios. Therefore, we do not know him at all, as he does not exist as a single entity (except perhaps on film, as an archetype). This leads to the question: Did he exist once, but only via common agreement between all interested parties (GCC, US, Bashar and Recep: Iran and Kurds and H. Nasrallah and B. Netanyahu &etc.)? As a part of global media culture, he most certainly did exist. His death was able to resurrect him from popular oblivion. The ‘facts’ are rather disputes or failures of intelligence. One day it will be as if he never was, not even in theory.

It is possible to kill the phantom, but it is impossible to stop his reproductions (or even to accurately predict their next occasion). His avatars simply wait to be proved into existence by the next addition in the ongoing al Baghdadi series. A new story about him may come from his own organization or it may issue from his opponents; it may be mundane or orientalistically exotic. He could be willed back into existence again – with minor modifications – if two or more parties in the game reach consensus.

Given the facts in the case, one must arrive at the conclusion that all information about the Shaykh must be considered accurate Intel. He is a meeting-point of many divergent concerns, a piece of high-value paranoia real estate. He is the model figure symbolizing all cannon of power and influencing agents – at least virtually – directing fanatical forces from a hidden centrifugal point. He will continue to represent ISIS after its latest defeat, but only because people will have difficulty remembering his successor's name (as in Zawahiri's post OBL career and Gerald Ford generally). He will also represent ISIL and Daesh, and possibly his own tendency in a split. Many names; many bodies – al Baghdadi is the perfect New Age guru, equal parts piety and sin.

Schrödinger's Caliph

The Saudi propaganda organ al 'Arabaya thinks he was really named Hamid Dawoud al Zawi. 'The Abu Bakr of Baghdad' is an obvious enough nom de guerre. But his black headdress would seem to indicate that he is a Sayyid, a descendent of the Prophet himself (which means an adherence to Shi'ism, obviously an extreme contradiction given his supposed Wahhabist sympathies). But perhaps he just likes the color. No doubt the late sage Bernard Lewis would have set us straight.

The Iraqi police said that they captured him (Hamid?). If so, he might still be in custody; we heard of no daring jailbreak in the El Chapo style.

Bin Laden acolyte Khaled al-Mashhadani contended that al Baghdadi does not exist. This is corroborated by the US military. And occasionally, by Iran.

In 2007, the Iraqi military claimed that the Americans had killed al Baghdadi (who they claim is still in custody, Iraqi custody that is – not American; al Baghdadi, apparently killed by the Americans, but not while in Iraqi custody...).

The Search for International Terrorist Entities Institute (SITE) declared that it can identify 'genuine' recordings of al Baghdadi, which bolsters certain claims of ISIS (Note: SITE is an anagram of SETI, another body which also analyzes contact with immaterial entities). This announcement angered the Iraqi military, whose claims of capturing al Baghdadi are refuted by the collaboration of SITE/ISIS, both of whom have authenticated messages by the Caliph independently.

All valuable commodities need authentication, experts like Christies'. Postmodern ideas on Art forgery are a major influence on the al Baghdadi cycle.

He was previously killed several years ago, along with his son (also killed again 2 days ago), by the Americans (who do not believe that he exists), in collaboration with the Iraqis (who believe that they had captured him back in 2010). Presidential hopeful Joe Biden and former Iraqi PM Nouri al Maliki were apparently in agreement over this somewhat complex state of affairs, though this may not be the case today.

ISIS-ISIL-Daesh has itself concurred with one or more of the above accounts, at various times, for various reasons. However, no matter how much the terrorist experts hang on their every word, ISIS may actually be lying! After all, they lied when they said al Baghdadi existed in the first place (possibly). But maybe they are not lying when they deny his capture or death (depending on which capture or death), etc. etc...

One last note: his underwear has surfaced, minus Caliph, as the final physical proof of his demise. Was he partial to boxers or briefs (a crucial detail)? Langley's low-hanging fruit of the loom.

If Schrödinger's hypothetical cat achieved the state of being alive and dead at the same time via a chamber of poisonous gas, then Schrodinger's Caliph has achieved the supreme state of being alive-dead/never-existing in a chamber of video and sarin.

It is so hard to keep all this straight. My colleagues at the New York Times, Air America, The Guardian and Dabiq... not to mention Counterpunch... We have all tried, I have tried, and to have tried is the most important thing. You need a feral intelligence, lest the spooks and clones lull you into a false sense of insecurity. Already, it is getting dark.