



ISLAM

Al-Baghdadi Announces the New Strategy of ISIS

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Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in his latest video



Five years after his first public appearance, the leader of the Islamic State has returned to show himself to the world and has invited jihadists to a war of attrition

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We knew that the **military defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria** would not herald the end of the jihadist organization but only its transformation. It was not entirely clear, however, what narrative would characterize this passage into ISIS' new phase. Some indications surface in the **18-minute video** with which **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**, the leader and self-styled caliph of the Islamic State, returned to show himself to the world after the much more triumphant appearance of July 2014. At that time, the proclamation of the caliphate was accompanied by an intense **apocalyptic propaganda**. Alluding to ancient prophecies, ISIS ideologues maintained that the end of time would have been anticipated by the restoration of a political order guided by a legitimate successor of Muhammed, a caliph. This rhetoric had already been belied by the military defeats of 2016. In particular, the loss of **Dabiq**, the Syrian city in which a tradition situates the final battle between the forces of good and evil, had forced ISIS to discontinue publishing its **e-magazine of the same name**.

The **time**, which five years ago the Islamic State jihadists declared was running out, now is **extended indefinitely**: "That of Islam against the crusaders is a long battle," said al-Baghdadi at the outset of his intervention, adding further that "the jihad will continue until the day of the resurrection."

The practical failure of the great political religions of the 20th century, Communism and Nazism, betokened also their theoretical failure. **Religious messianism**, and in particular its Islamist version, has at its disposal, however, an additional ideological resource: by virtue of their "**martyrdom**," in fact, the fighters of jihad are victorious even when they are militarily defeated. Al-Baghdadi thus was able to affirm that "God has ordained the jihad for us, but he has not ordained victory for us," forgetting, perhaps, that the proclamation with which in 2014 he had been declared caliph was titled "This is the promise of God."

In the present context, the name that epitomizes the new strategy of ISIS seems to be "**attrition**" (*istinza*). Referring especially to the Libyan fighters operative in the city of Fuqaha, al-Baghdadi affirmed that "there is today a battle of attrition (*ma 'arakat istinza*)," and he exhorted all jihadists to "keep pace with the enemies, wearing them down in their human, military, economic, and logistical capacities." This is a recurring theme within jihadist organizations, for whom acts of guerilla warfare against the enemy represent a phase preliminary to the institution of an Islamic order. In his "The management of savagery," a manifesto especially relevant for understanding the worldview of ISIS, the ideologue known as **Abu Bakr Naji** described the path toward the construction of the caliphate as a journey in three stages: **the vexation and exhaustion (nikaya)** of the enemy, **the management of savagery** that would follow it (*idarat al-tawahhush*), and **institutional and territorial consolidation (tamkin)**. The Islamic State also followed this progression in arriving at the declaration of its own caliphate between Syria and Iraq.

For ISIS, the post-state phase would seem therefore to be a **return to its origins**, with the regression from its territorial dimension to its guerrilla operations. If on the battlefield it is evident that this is already the case, the propaganda of the jihadist organization has not given up presenting a somewhat different reality. The final part of the video features an enactment in which four emissaries of the "caliph" brief him, presenting him with dossiers on the situation of the provinces of the Islamic State, as if it were a still-existing entity. Furthermore, already just a few weeks after its defeat at Baghuz, in an issue of its weekly newsletter ISIS used the formula "war of attrition" to invite others to extend to the rest of the world the strategy deployed successfully in the Arab Levant:



Contrary to what some believe, the fighters of jihad have not taken possession of Iraqi cities and consolidated their presence there overnight; neither have they suddenly created an organized force capable of waging war in the open field against the idolaters. They have persevered for several years in an exhausting war of attrition [...]. With the permission of God, the guerilla warfare of the caliphate's troops, which is now spreading into various countries, will be able to replicate in every region the blessed experience of the conquest of Mosul. [...] If in Iraq the jihadists needed about seven years to establish territorial consolidation, today the goal is closer, and we will move gradually toward restoring Dar al-Islam and the religion in the East and the West.

After the defeat in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State seems therefore to point to a **multiplication of small local fronts on a global scale**. This makes it all the more **similar to al-Qaida**, heightening its rivalry with the organization led by Ayman al-Zawahiri for the hegemony of international jihadism. If until recently the propaganda of ISIS could capitalize on its state dimension, boasting of a goal that al-Qaida never attained, now the Islamic State has lost this advantage and therefore needs to increase the visibility of its own actions. This seems to be the logic underlying the attacks in Sri Lanka: an attack against tourists and Christians in a country with a large majority of Buddhists and Hindus, and therefore planned more for its **symbolic impact** than for its actual strategic value. One can explain in the same perspective the reference by al-Baghdadi to two African fronts, **Mali and Burkina Faso**, in which to date al-Qaida has been more active, as well as his invitation to bring the jihad into Sudan and Algeria also given the fall in these two countries of their respective "tyrants."

Just a few months ago, an analyst **observed** that Sunni jihadism was evolving toward forms of **local militancy**. The new strategy of ISIS, which is weakened but not defeated, suggests that the time of transnational Islamist terrorism is not finished.

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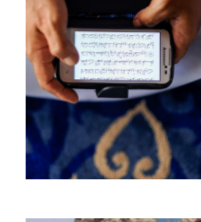
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OASIS INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION
Email: oasis@fondazioneoasis.org

ADMINISTRATIVE AND LEGAL OFFICE
Piazza San Giorgio, 2
20123 - Milan
Italy
Phone **+39 02 26500431**

SECONDARY OFFICE
Via Daniele Manin, 34
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