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Death of Baghdadi: Specter of Radicalization & Violent Extremism



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Abstract

The killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has been hailed as a success in dealing a death blow to the Islamic state leadership and organization. Despite such claims of early success of counter terrorism (CT) operations, some fundamental questions remain unanswered. Will the setback of losing its top leader induce a phase of operational paralysis in the Islamic State (IS) or will it turn out to be only temporary, without much impact on the activity of the affiliates and individuals who kill in the name of the organization? What are the factors which will continue to aid the agencies of terror and radicalization? How will incidents of radicalization and violent extremism fan out, following the death of Baghdadi? And what impact will this episode have on India's CT and counter-violent extremism efforts? This brief provides answers to these questions

Introduction

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the supreme leader of the Islamic State (IS), was killed during a secret operation by US special forces in northern Syria on 26 October in Syria. Another terrorist named Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir, described by US President Donald Trump as Baghdadi's potential successor too was killed in a strike the following day. These two incidents will further weaken the organization which is aiming to adopt new strategies to stay afloat and relevant after the decimation of its empire nearly two years back. However, whether the damage would be permanent and may liquidate the organization would depend upon an array of factors like the intent of future operations against the outfit, the adaptability of the organisation to the new realities, and the ability of a new terrorist leader to provide meaning and direction to the 'industry of terror'. In any event, the real fight against the IS or its successor would have to be fought over great swathes of various continents, against established 'terror provinces', regional affiliates, and Do-it-Yourself (DIY) cadres of the group. Terrorism, radicalization, and violent extremism would continue to pose as serious threats to a large number of states.

Leadership and Ideology

Strikes that annihilate the top leadership of terror outfits do leave them paralyzed. The longevity of such debilitation, however, may depend on the extent to which the leaders have prepared the organization to withstand losses and recover from them. In simple words, the terror outfit with a pre-decided succession hierarchy is much likely to bounce back than one which does not have one. In the case of the latter, the death of the supreme leader may lead to a succession struggle. While al Qaeda is still in the process of recovering from the death of Osama bin Laden and may actually never be able to do so, the case with the IS could be different. However, in actuality the process is much more complex. Ideology plays a much greater part than leadership. The IS could emerge as a much more lethal terror organization as its success was based on its ability to take the anti-west and anti-Shia outlook to a new level. As is apparent, each passing day, terror organizations must delve lower into the abyss of violence and hatred to remain relevant. Or else those will be replaced by new groups which have the ability to do so.

A Successor

The IS has reportedly appointed¹ Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi as the new leader of the group. Little is known about him. However, it is irrelevant who becomes the top leader of the group where decentralization and operating through franchises are the norms. In spite of its weakness, the IS has quietly transformed into its 2.0 version, where the aspirations and not actual linkages with the parent organization drives the agenda of the affiliates. The violence potential of the IS would depend upon the terror-prevention potential of the respective countries where the affiliates or the lone wolves are based. With time, terrorism, violent extremism, and radicalization continue to enter much more complex phases.

New Theatres and Expansion

What is being projected as a paralysis for the IS, may turn out to be only 'hemiplegia', a medical condition that affects only one part of the body. In the coming months, parts of West Asia, Africa, Southeast Asia, and Afghanistan look imminent to remain the focus of the violence of groups that the IS has either established itself and has formed alliance with. Lone wolves or former IS cadres who have fled captivity or have evaded arrest are bound to continue with their activities in countries that are difficult to shortlist. The death of Baghdadi may impede the group's ability to expand further, but will do little to checkmate the activities of the affiliates and aspirational terrorists. Depending upon the theatre where such activities are being/ will be planned, both terrorism by IS affiliates or lone wolf/ DIY brand of terrorism would remain an unmitigated threat. Possibility of spectacular retaliatory attacks to avenge the death of the death of Baghdadi would remain real.

Following the Turkish raids in Syria, reports on how probable prison breaks in Iraq and Syria could help the IS build its cadre strength had appeared in the media.² The spectacular achievement of neutralising the IS top leader, however, do not address the underlying conditions that contribute to keeping the violence potential of IS and affiliates intact. In addition to the waiting-to-explode prisons teeming with Jihadists in Iraq and Syria that may quickly allow the IS to rebuild its lost strength, radicalization continues to remain a key driver of terrorism and violent extremism. Countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts have at best achieved moderate success in some countries. Across the vast expanse of the playing grounds of the global jihadists, resources and lack of inter-state collaboration remain primary challenges. Global jihadists have excelled in making the threat they pose appear local and hence, of less interest to the major powers. This will continue to aid their expansion plan in theatres where state control is lax and ability of law enforcement agencies are much to be desired.

Implications for India

For the security establishment, the influence of global jihad on India appears to be insignificant. Baghdadi's death in all likelihood will further weaken the ability of the global jihadists to find root in India. While the al Qaeda attempted to set up a branch in Kashmir, the IS succeeded in attracting few men and women from various states of the country. However, considering India's huge Muslim

¹ Martin Chulov, "Islamic State names new leader after death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi", *The Guardian*, 31 October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/31/islamic-state-new-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-abu-ibrahim-al-hashimi-al-qurayshi>. Accessed on 31 October 2019.

² Bassem Mroue, "Turkish invasion raises fears of Islamic State prison break", *AP News*, 11 October 2019, <https://apnews.com/f366e0aeaa1349769cbc0a73bbe02c26>. Accessed on 30 October 2019.

population, the impact is seen as minimal and not so worrisome. Jihad in India espoused mostly local issues. Ability of the security forces to frequently eliminate the terrorists affiliated with either the al Qaeda or the IS has ensured that nascent efforts of providing a global fervor to Kashmir's militancy are unsuccessful. On 24 October, three terrorists belonging to the al Qaeda affiliate Ansar Ghazwat-ul Hind (AGH) including its chief Hamid Lehari were killed in Pulwama district of south Kashmir. The police chief has declared that the 'AGH group has been wiped out for now'.³ It is a matter of time that another set of youth will seek to step into the shoes of Lehari and associates.

Absence of terrorism/ violent extremism with external linkages, however, cannot be a source of much comfort. Such successes in counter-terrorism will, however, have to be expanded to the realm of preventing radicalization and dealing with the specter of violent extremism. Especially in Kashmir, where the decision of the government to abrogate article 370 of the Indian constitution has fanned dissent, dangers of violent extremism becoming a perennial national security threat in the medium and long term is real. Experiences of other nations bear testimony to the reality of unceasing and complex challenges posed by these two phenomena. Countries claiming to have excellent CT records have discovered the limitations of applying the same formula to CVE. The emphasis needs to be on prevention of violent extremism (PVE) which needs a 'whole of society and government' approach. While Baghdadi's death may not have direct repercussions on India's security scene, local dissent and online radicalization would continue to shape extremism in India. Moreover, incidents of extremism and radicalization in Southeast, Central Asia, and Afghanistan too may remain the source of inspiration for the potential extremists as the IS finds new theatre of operations in the region.

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³ "Al-Qaeda offshoot AGH wiped out from Kashmir: J&K DGP", *Economic Times*, 24 October 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/al-qaeda-offshoot-ansar-ghazwatul-hind-wiped-out-from-kashmir-jammu-kashmir-dgp/articleshow/71719426.cms>. Accessed on 30 October 2019.

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