Beyond Baghdadi
The Next Wave of Jihadist Violence

By Seth G. Jones

THE ISSUE
Since 9/11, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have suffered multiple setbacks, from the 2006 death of al-Qaeda in Iraq chief Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to the 2011 killing of Osama bin Laden. Now comes the death of Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. While significant in the short term, al-Baghdadi’s demise is unlikely to have a long-term impact. The persistence of jihadist movements has largely been a result of structural conditions like local grievances and weak governance. These conditions remain prevalent in parts of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, raising the possibility of a new wave of violence.

The death of Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—and his replacement by Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi—is another setback for the jihadist movement that captured the world’s attention beginning in 2014. Following its military defeat along the Hajin-Baghuz corridor in Syria earlier this year, the Islamic State lost its last major area of control in Syria and Iraq, which at its largest point approached the size of Belgium. U.S. military and intelligence units had also decimated the Islamic State’s external operations capability, killing leaders like Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the chief spokesman and head of Islamic State external operations.

Yet the death of al-Baghdadi is not the first time the demise of a jihadist leader has led to hope—even expectation—that the movement was on a trajectory to defeat. Nor will it be the last. In March 2003, shortly after the United States captured al-Qaeda leader Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, one of the masterminds of the September 11, 2001 attacks, a Washington Post headline trumpeted: “Al Qaeda’s Top Primed to Collapse, U.S. Says.” A few years later, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf gloated about the success of counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda. “Pakistan has shattered the al Qa’ida network in the region, severing its lateral and vertical linkages,” he said. “It is now on the run and has ceased to exist as a homogenous force, capable of undertaking coordinated operations.”2 After the 2006 death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq and a predecessor of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, President George W. Bush remarked that his killing was a “severe blow” to jihadist networks in Iraq.3 Not to be outdone, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton remarked in May 2011 that “the death of Osama bin Laden has put al-Qaeda on the path to defeat.”4 U.S. and other officials were wrong in all of these cases, as jihadist networks resurfaced. Predictions of defeat were perhaps most egregious after the death of al-Zarqawi. Only a few years later, the Islamic State—the successor organization to al-Zarqawi’s al-Qaeda in Iraq—conducted its blitzkrieg operations in Iraq and Syria led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

What factors have contributed to the resurgence of jihadist violence? And what are the implications following the death of al-Baghdadi? In answering these questions, this
analysis argues that the jihadist movement has ebbed and flowed during a series of four waves that have occurred between 1988 and today. The persistence of jihadist groups and networks has been caused by structural conditions like the existence of local grievances and weak governments—not individual leaders. Decapitation strategies, in which governments attempt to weaken or destroy a group by capturing or killing its leadership, generally provide only a temporary reprieve. The demise of al-Baghdadi is unlikely to degrade today’s decentralized jihadist movement. Instead, the prevalence of substantial grievances and weak governance in parts of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia suggests that a fifth wave is likely. And it could come in the form of a revival of the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, an offshoot of one or both, or a merger of Islamic State and al-Qaeda networks.

The rest of this brief is divided into four sections. The first outlines the history of waves and reverse waves among jihadist groups. The second section provides an overview of the current jihadist landscape, particularly those connected to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The third discusses the conditions important for the resurgence of the Islamic State or other jihadist groups. The fourth section offers some conclusions and highlights the persistence of jihadist ideology on the Internet and social media platforms.

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WAVES AND REVERSE WAVES

Since al-Qaeda’s establishment in 1988, there have been four main “waves” of jihadist activity, characterized by surges in terrorist violence. These waves have been followed by “reverse waves,” when violence decreases. As political scientist David Rapoport explained, a wave “is a cycle of activity in a given time period—a cycle characterized by expansion and contraction phases. A crucial feature is its international character; similar activities occur in several countries, driven by a common predominant energy that shapes the participating groups’ characteristics and mutual relationships.” The jihadist waves have spanned multiple countries as violence surges, highlighted by a rise in attacks and plots. Waves are generally followed by reverse waves, as violence levels subside because of effective counterterrorism strategies and operations by governments, internal friction and disarray within groups, a decline in resources or popular support, and other factors.

The first wave started in the late-1980s as Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and other leaders established al-Qaeda during the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan. Following the September 2001 attacks, this wave began to ebb as the United States and its partners killed or captured al-Qaeda leaders and operatives in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States, and other areas. A second wave began around 2003 after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and was characterized by an upsurge in attacks across Iraq and in Casablanca, Madrid, London, and elsewhere. A reverse wave followed by 2006, as al-Qaeda in Iraq was severely weakened by U.S. and other coalition operations, U.S. and partner intelligence and law enforcement agencies foiled several plots, and U.S. drone strikes killed senior al-Qaeda operatives in Pakistan. A third wave grew from 2007 to 2009 following the rise of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, led in part by the charismatic Yemeni-American leader Anwar al-Awlaki. It, too, was followed by a reverse wave, with the death of Osama bin Laden in 2011 and other senior leaders, including al-Awlaki. The Arab Spring helped create the conditions for a fourth wave of activity as jihadist networks established a foothold—or expanded their presence—in such countries as Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Libya, and Somalia. This wave was caused, in part, by weakening governance associated with the spread of the Arab Spring and substantial Sunni grievances against governments like Syria and Iraq. It was also facilitated by a U.S. military withdrawal from the region.

The collapse of the Islamic State’s control of territory and the death of its leaders—including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—suggest that the fourth wave is subsiding. But a fifth wave is certainly possible.

THE JIHADIST LANDSCAPE

The Islamic State and al-Qaeda have a continuing presence in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, despite the Islamic State’s loss of territory and the death of al-Baghdadi and other leaders (including Islamic State spokesman Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir, who was killed by U.S. forces in October 2019 near the northern Syrian town of Jarabulus). On October 31, 2019, the Islamic State announced its new leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi.

Figure 1 highlights some of the Islamic State’s influential leaders, who will likely be critical to creating a fifth wave. One is Amir Muhammad Sa’id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawl, a religious scholar who has helped oversee Islamic State global operations and orchestrate the slaughter of the Yazidi religious minority in northwest Iraq. Another is Sami Jasim Muhammad al-Jaburi, who manages finances for the Islamic State and has supervised the group’s illicit sale of oil, gas,
antiquities, and minerals. In addition, Mu’taz Numan ’Abd Nayif Najm al-Jaburi has deep historical ties to the Islamic State’s predecessor organization, al-Qaeda in Iraq, and extensive experience in bomb-making and terrorist and insurgent activities. Outside of Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State has other influential leaders, such as Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, leader of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara.7

In Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State is attempting to restore its networks east and west of the Euphrates River as part of its desert (or saharaa) strategy.8 The goal is to rebuild the movement’s territorial strength, or tamkin. Islamic State fighters have established sanctuaries in the Badiya desert and the Jazira region along the Iraqi-Syrian border, amassed arms and materiel, and perpetrated guerrilla hit-and-run attacks against local forces.9 Indeed, the Islamic State outlined its strategy in the four-part series, “The Temporary Fall of Cities as a Working Method for the Mujahideen,” published in the Islamic State newsletter al-Naba’.10 As highlighted in Part I of the series, it has urged its adherents to wage “guerrilla warfare . . . against the disbelievers and apostates, preparing the way for lasting control of the land.”11

The Islamic State continues to conduct attacks. As highlighted in Figure 2, it orchestrated 572 attacks from January through September 2019 across 21 provinces in Iraq (276 attacks) and Syria (296 attacks).12 In Iraq, the attacks have occurred in provinces like Diyala, Anbar, Ninewa, Kirkuk, and Salahuddin. In Syria, Islamic State attacks have largely been centered in Raqqah, Dayr az Zawr, Homs, and Hasakah.13

Perhaps most concerning, there are still at least 30,000 to 37,000 jihadist fighters in Syria and Iraq from the Islamic State and two al-Qaeda-linked groups: Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and Tanzim Hurras al-Din.15 Over the next several months, more jihadists may enter the battlefield after escaping—or being released—from prisons run by the Syrian Democratic

Figure 1: Example of Senior Islamic State Leaders

![Amir Muhammad Sa’id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla](https://rewardsforjustice.net/english)

Amir Muhammad Sa’id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla
Senior Leader Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)


![Sami Jasim Muhammad al-Jaburi](https://rewardsforjustice.net/english)

Sami Jasim Muhammad al-Jaburi
Senior Leader of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)


Figure 2: Islamic State Attacks in Iraq and Syria, 2019

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Source: “Jane’s Terrorism and Insurgency Centre,” IHS Markit, 2019.
Forces (SDF) in areas like al-Hol, located in eastern Syria near the border with Iraq. After all, there are roughly 10,000 Islamic State fighters in prisons run by the SDF, as well as thousands more in prisons and camps that may support an extremist ideology. While Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham has experienced sometimes frosty relations with Ayman al-Zawahiri and other al-Qaeda leaders, the organization still has strong connections with Salafi-jihadist networks in the region. Tanzim Hurras al-Din has close links with al-Qaeda and is led by Faruq al-Suri, an al-Qaeda veteran.

The problem is much larger than Iraq and Syria, however. Figure 3 shows the location of attacks perpetrated by the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and groups that have sworn allegiance (or bay’ah) to them in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia from January to September 2019. It indicates high levels of violence in Syria and Iraq, along with Yemen from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula; West Africa from Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wa al Muslimeen (and, to a lesser extent, the Islamic State Greater Sahara); northeastern Nigeria (and bordering countries) from Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa; Somalia from al-Shabaab; Afghanistan from the Islamic State Khorasan Province; and other Islamic State provinces (or wilayats) in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

THE CONDITIONS FOR RESURGENCE
What factors might contribute to a fifth wave of jihadist activity? The Islamic State is an insurgent group that aims to seize, hold, and govern territory, and it uses terrorism as a primary tactic. The challenges for insurgent groups are often staggering. Most have limited popular support, little money, few weapons and supplies, and only a handful of recruits. Some, like the Islamic State, overcame these hurdles—but now face renewed challenges.

My research on nearly 200 insurgencies suggests that three sets of factors increase the probability of an insurgency: grievances, weak governance, and greed.

The first are local grievances. Groups need a cause that charismatic leaders can use to help mobilize or coerce a local population. Insurgents have long recognized the
importance of co-opting and sometimes even coercing the population. As the Chinese military theorist and leader Mao Tse-Tung argued in one of the most common axioms of insurgent warfare, a “primary feature of guerrilla operations is their dependence upon the people themselves.” Mao likened the local population to water and insurgents to fish that need water to survive. 

Second, a weak government with incompetent police and military forces is generally an important cause of insurgencies. Since insurgents start with few resources, a weak state provides a welcome opportunity for rebellion. Third, the availability of resources like oil or drugs increases the probability of an insurgency by allowing groups to obtain the resources necessary to challenge the state.

Many of these conditions still exist—including in Iraq and Syria. Baghdadi’s death will likely have little effect on the conditions that lead to jihadist activity. Local grievances abound. Take Syria, which is today a shattered state with a feeble and unpopular government led by Bashar al-Assad. It has massive economic problems and has suffered substantial infrastructure destruction, with an estimated 83 percent of the population living below the poverty line. Iraq is little better, with a proliferation of Shia militias and ethnic and religious grievances still raw among Sunni Arabs, Kurds, and other populations.

Governance challenges also remain significant. In Syria, the Assad regime does not control parts of the northwest like Idlib, parts of the north that are occupied by Turkish and SDF soldiers, and parts of the east and south that are controlled by SDF, Sunni Arab, and other sub-state actors. According to the World Bank, Syria ranks in the lowest 2 percent of countries in the world in government effectiveness, the lowest 3 percent in regulatory quality, the lowest 1 percent in political stability, and the lowest 2 percent in its ability to control corruption. Iraq has its own governance problems, as illustrated by growing anti-government protests that have gained support around the country.

Finally, the Islamic State continues to have financial resources of between $50 million and $300 million, which should help it continue operations. Taken together, the emergence of al-Qaeda in Iraq and its successor, the Islamic State, demonstrate how local grievances and weak governance can lead to insurgencies. Those insurgencies, in turn, served to intensify grievances and allow groups to

Figure 4: Map of Weak Governance and Jihadist Activity

amass resources, leaving Iraq and Syria potentially more vulnerable to a resurgence.

Killing the leader of insurgent and terrorist groups—what is often referred to as a “decapitation strategy”—is generally only successful against tightly-centralized groups that rely on one main individual for inspiration and decisionmaking. Neither the Islamic State nor al-Qaeda fits into this category. Both are increasingly decentralized, which has allowed them to rebound following the death or capture of individuals like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Anwar al-Awlaki, Osama bin Laden, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, and now Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Figure 4 illustrates the problem with weak governance. The Islamic State and al-Qaeda continue to operate in countries ravaged by war and with weak or non-existent governments and security services. The figure includes two sets of data: terrorist attacks perpetrated by the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates, which was shown in Figure 3; and government effectiveness. The figure shows that most of the countries impacted by al-Qaeda and the Islamic State—including Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, and Somalia—are at or near the bottom 10 percent of countries worldwide in terms of government effectiveness. Most are also in the bottom 10 percent of countries worldwide in other governance indicators, such as control of corruption. Based on such poor governance indicators, the conditions for terrorism and insurgency persist.

THE NEXT WAVE

Instead of taking concrete steps to deal with the structural conditions that could lead to a fifth wave, the United States appears to be hedging in the opposite direction by disengaging from key parts of the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. A U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, for example, would further increase the possibility of a fifth wave by handing an extremist Islamic group, the Taliban, a win in the very country that gave rise to Osama bin Laden in the 1980s. The presence in Afghanistan today of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (al-Qaeda’s local affiliate) and the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (the Islamic State’s local wilayat) would make this development even more concerning.

In the Middle East, the U.S. military withdrawal from northern Syria has notable implications for a jihadist resurgence. It has forced Washington’s main ground ally against the Islamic State, the Kurdish-led SDF, to shift resources away from conducting counterterrorism operations and intelligence collection against the Islamic State and toward fighting Turkish government and partner forces. The value of Washington’s partnership with the SDF, particularly the People’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, or YPG), was evident during the al-Baghdadi raid in Syria. After receiving intelligence gleaned from the interrogation of a courier and one of al-Baghdadi’s wives, the Central Intelligence Agency and U.S. military helped pinpoint al-Baghdadi’s movements with the help of a high-level Islamic State defector who had been cultivated as an intelligence asset by the SDF. The United States also collected substantial amounts of information from signals, human, geospatial, and other types of intelligence.

But a Kurdish shift in priorities has potentially serious consequences because the Islamic State has not been defeated. Without a U.S. presence to support SDF efforts against the Islamic State and al-Qaeda in Syria, and with lingering grievances and governance challenges in Syria and
Iraq, a fifth wave is possible. It could come in the form of a revival of the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, an offshoot of one or both, or a merger of Islamic State and al-Qaeda networks. Indeed, al-Baghdadi’s decision to seek shelter in the Syrian home of Abu Mohammed Salama, a commander of the al-Qaeda linked Tanzim Hurras al-Din, highlights the fluidity of jihadist networks in the region and the potential for cooperation across groups and networks.\(^{33}\)

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Al-Baghdadi had long been preparing his followers to continue operations after his death, and he had encouraged the delegation of authority to its wilayats abroad.\(^{34}\) In April 2019, for example, al-Baghdadi vowed a “long battle” ahead and urged his “brothers in the provinces” to continue the fight. He praised members of the Islamic State’s wilayats for their efforts to “avenge their brothers in Syria, which amounted to 92 operations in eight countries.”\(^{35}\) Similarly, al-Qaeda has been preparing its global followers to be self-reliant in achieving the movement’s goals: respect for the tawhid, or oneness of God; support for governance by Islamic law; the unification of Muslims across the world around the tawhid; revival of the duty of armed jihad to “liberate” countries across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia and target their supporters like the United States; and the construction of a caliphate.\(^{36}\)

Preventing a fifth wave will not be easy. It will require a light but persistent U.S. military, intelligence, and diplomatic presence in key countries, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Somalia. The United States will need to work with local state and non-state partners, collect information on burgeoning jihadist groups, conduct strikes when feasible, and help identify and address local grievances and governance challenges that may allow or encourage jihadist networks to resurge.

Preventing a fifth wave should also entail a persistent campaign to undermine the ideology of groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. One of al-Baghdadi’s most significant legacies is his recognition that a critical struggle is for the hearts and minds of the ummah (or Islamic community). The Islamic State, in particular, has successfully cultivated its brand online. It is still waging a “virtual” battle using social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook; encrypted messaging apps like Telegram and Surespot; video platforms like YouTube and TikTok; and content-sharing systems like JustPaste.it. It should be no surprise that in October 2019—shortly before the death of al-Baghdadi—the social media app TikTok removed roughly two dozen accounts related to the Islamic State, which posted slick, catchy videos designed to recruit supporters.\(^{37}\) These developments suggest that the struggle is not over. It is just entering a new phase. \(\blacksquare\)

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3. Figure 1 includes data from attacks between January and September 2019.


20. Figure 1 includes data from attacks between January and September 2019.


19. Figure 1 includes data from attacks between January and September 2019.


24. Ibid., 93.


36. See, for example, Ayman al-Zawahiri, “To Other than Allah We Will Not Kneel,” As-Sahab Media Foundation, January 2016. The transcript and translation are courtesy of the SITE Intelligence Group.