

## ISIS' Islamic Stagecraft

By Hdeel Abdelhady\*

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In a short period of time, the group calling itself the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL or ISIS) evolved from an obscurity to a [continent-traversing, territory-holding, “tax”-collecting, oil-selling, antiquities-trading, bureaucratic](#) criminal enterprise masquerading as a “state.” ISIS’ very existence is, as a logistical matter, perplexing. Accounts of the group’s emergence are many, but they do not satisfyingly explain how ISIS metastasized in a hyper-surveilled world in which military forces are ubiquitous and financial transactions are routinely (if not perfectly) scrutinized for terrorism financing and other illicit activity.

While ISIS’ backstory is murky, its savagery is real. But ISIS’ “Islam” is stagecraft. Its “caliphate” is a sham. And its apparent leader is an identity thief.

ISIS’ purported leader, who according to [unconfirmed reports](#) may have been killed, goes by the stage name “Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.” His real name [reportedly](#) is “Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri,” a plain Arabic name more befitting of an everyman than a self-styled “Leader of the Faithful” or “Amir al Mu’mineen.”

al-Badri’s stage name—one of ISIS’ misappropriations of Islamic texts, history, and imagery—confers on al-Badri a veneer of gravitas by association. In Islam, the best-known and most revered Abu Bakr is Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (ra), who was the father-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh), among the first to accept Islam, and the first successor to the Prophet (pbuh) who, as such, was the first of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs (“al-Khulafā al-Rāshidūn;” khulafā is the plural of the Arabic word khalifa, which here means successor and, in the political sense, the leader of the Muslim community. The Romanized word is caliph).

The “al-Baghdadi” part of the apparent ISIS leader’s stage name could be a reference to the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, which has produced and nurtured some of Islam’s greatest scholars and is not far from al-Badri’s reported birthplace in Iraq. Or, perhaps, “al-Baghdadi” evokes another historical figure known as al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, a noted Islamic scholar and historian of Baghdad who was born near that city and died there in 1071 CE. (al-Khatib al-Baghdadi’s first name was Abu Bakr, but he is not commonly known by that name. Notably, he is known to have traveled to Syria during a period of turmoil in Baghdad).

Keeping in character, al-Badri again helped himself to Abu Bakr al-Siddiq’s (ra) legacy in 2014, when he made his first known public appearance at Iraq’s Great Mosque of al-Nuri, which except for its minaret was [bombed to rubbles by ISIS in June](#) according to U.S. and Iraqi officials. There,

al-Badri declared a “caliphate,” proclaimed himself “caliph,” performed a “[sermon](#),” and lifted words from Abu Bakr al-Siddiq’s (ra) inaugural address to the Muslim community, delivered in Medina almost immediately after the Prophet Mohammed’s (pbuh) death.

<p><b>Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri</b> (<i>a.k.a.</i> “Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi”), 2015 CE (<a href="#">translation at Al Arabiya English</a>) (excerpt)</p>	<p><b>Khalifa Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (ra)</b> <b>Inaugural Address to the People of Madinah, 632 CE</b> (excerpt) (English translations of this speech vary)</p>
<p><i>“I have been tasked with this great burden, and this great responsibility. It is a great responsibility, and I was chosen to lead you, while I am not the best among you, and no better than you. If you see me doing the right-hood, help me, and if you see me on falsehood, advise me and lead me to the right path.”</i></p>	<p><i>“I have assumed authority over your affairs, but I am not the best of you . . . and the greatest humility comes from iniquity. The weak among you is the strongest for me, until such time as I have had his rights restored, and the strong among you is the weakest until I have secured from him rights [that were usurped] . . . I am a follower (of the Shari’ah) but not its inventor. If I do well cooperate with me, but if I deviate [from the right path], correct me. With this I end my talk and beseech God that He may forgive you and me.”</i></p>

Even with its plagiarized words, al-Badri’s speech—conspicuously pedestrian in content and mechanical in delivery—was devoid of legitimacy. Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (ra) was well-known to Muslims and admired for his steadfastness, humility, and honesty—indeed, “al-Siddiq,” a sobriquet given him by the Prophet (pbuh), means “the truthful.” ISIS’ al-Badri, on the other hand, emerged seemingly out of nowhere, gave himself a stage name, and has played the part of a mostly unseen character in a macabre, anti-Islam and anti-Muslim storyline that has destroyed real lives. To state what should not need to be stated, al-Badri has no valid claim to succession to the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) and his rightful successors.

Like the alias “Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,” al-Badri’s “sermon” and all other things ISIS are an affront to Islam and Muslims, except perhaps to that small minority that does not cringe at ISIS’ existence or the smaller but lethal pool of ISIS foot soldiers who tend to [know little to nothing about Islam](#) and seem to be well-represented by the [violence-prone](#) and acutely susceptible, such as unreformed [ex-convicts](#), [drug dealers](#), [misfits](#), the [mentally ill](#), [seducible teenagers](#), and adrift or “bad” Muslims who seem to have been convinced that committing unspeakable acts (often as their final act) will erase their sins and render them righteous in the eyes of God (Allah, swt)). Nothing could be further from the truth.

Those with even a passable understanding of Islam will know—or should—that ISIS’ conduct and “teachings” are antithetical to Islam and its objectives.

Islam addresses the fundamentals and details of Muslims’ lives (not universally followed, of course), including in matters of war and peace. Individual chapters and verses of the Qur’an and portions of the Sunnah, along with the established consensus of qualified Islamic jurists, cannot and should not be read in isolation. (The Sunnah comprises the authenticated statements, actions, and rulings of the Prophet (pbuh) and is, with the Qur’an, a primary source of Islamic Law (Shari’ah)).

For example, the Qur’an recurrently exhorts Muslims to honor and act kindly toward their parents. The injunction applies not only to obvious aspects of family life (as one might assume), but also in the context of jihad (a term that means essentially “struggle” or “exertion of effort” and is used here in the sense of armed conflict). This was made clear in an authenticated statement of the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) who, in response to a man who sought his permission to take part in jihad, asked the man if his parents were alive. Told that they were, the Prophet (pbuh) instructed the man to, instead of partaking in jihad, “exert himself in his parents’ service.” The Prophet’s (pbuh) instruction is incorporated in the law of jihad as settled by juristic consensus. As the classical Islamic scholar Ibn Rushd (known in the West as Averroës) explained in his authoritative restatement of Islamic law, permission of parents is a condition to participation in (*lawful*) jihad when a collective obligation on eligible men who are of age, financial means, and sound physical and mental health. Among other points of dubiousness, the mental fitness of ISIS fighters is questionable, including their sobriety in light of reports that ISIS [gives its fighters illicit drugs](#), such as “hallucinogenic pills that would make you go to battle not caring if you live or die.”

The parental consent and other individual eligibility requirements of the law of jihad are not merely technical rules or concerned only with parental control. Read narrowly, they illustrate that jihad—and to be clear, ISIS’ campaign of carnage is not jihad—is not to be undertaken capriciously or to the unjustifiable detriment of individuals, families, and societies. More broadly, these rules (with others) advance wider objectives of Islamic law.

For ISIS, which mangles Islam for branding purposes, the Islamic law of war is clearly irrelevant, including settled rules as to what constitutes jihad and governs its conduct. In breach of Islamic Law, ISIS recruits young men and women to enlist, behind the backs and against the will of their parents and families, in its fake jihad. The group grooms and deploys children as “[soldiers](#)” to commit atrocities, including against themselves. ISIS recruiters urge young targets to [steal from their parents](#) to finance their surreptitious travels to ISIS locales. One ISIS fighter [reportedly](#) executed his mother in public.

ISIS' assault on Islam and Muslims does not start or end there. ISIS' victims [are overwhelmingly Muslim](#). The group [murders](#) men, women, and children; destroys cities, towns and Muslim-majority countries; makes orphans of children; displaces families and communities; [extorts](#) money and private property from civilians; [rapes](#) girls and women; and [brutalizes](#) captives who are akin to prisoners of war, such as Muath Al Kasasbeh, the Royal Jordanian Air Force pilot burned alive in a cage by ISIS.

These and other of ISIS' crimes contravene bright line rules and precedents of Islamic law, not only on war, but also on the treatment of orphans, private property rights (including against government taking without legal cause and compensation at fair market value), the treatment of Muslims by other Muslims, and dealings with non-Muslims.

The Qur'an enjoins Muslim unity and condemns the killing, eviction, and displacement of Muslims by other Muslims. For the perpetrators of these acts, the Qur'an calls out their hypocritical cherry picking of its verses and promises a penalty:

*"After this it is ye, the same people, who slay among yourselves, and banish a party of you from their homes; assist (Their enemies) against them, in guilt and transgression; and if they come to you as captives, ye ransom them, though it was not lawful for you to banish them. Then it is only a part of the [Qur'an] that ye believe in, and do you reject the rest? But what is the reward for those among you who behave like this but disgrace in this life? And on the Day of Judgment they shall be consigned to the most grievous penalty. For Allah is not unmindful of what ye do."*  
(Qur'an, 2:85).

In war, the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) instructed Muslim soldiers to not embezzle property, mistreat captives, or kill women and children. In peace, the Prophet (pbuh) established and adhered to treaties providing for, among other matters, respect for non-Muslims. For example, in the Treaty with the People of Najran (in modern Saudi Arabia), the Prophet (pbuh) pledged that:

*"The people of Najran . . . will have . . . the protection of God and of His Messenger as regards their lives, wealth, churches, monkhood, bishopric, and (affairs of) those present and absent . . . No bishop will be removed from his bishopric, nor a vicar from his vicarage nor a monk from his monastery. They (the people) will not be expelled from their lands . . . Their lands will not be trampled upon by any army and whoever makes a claim will be afforded justice within Najran. All this on the condition that they will not deal in riba . . ." [riba, often understood as, but is not limited to, monetary interest or usury].*

Other treaties and agreements made by the Prophet (pbuh)—such as with the Jewish community of Medina, providing, among other things, that the “Jews have a right to their religion and the believers [Muslims] to theirs”—illustrate a similar orderliness of state affairs and respect for others, as decreed by the Qur’an (wherein, for example, Allah (swt) instructs the Prophet (pbuh) to say to the disbelievers: “For you is your religion, and for me is my religion.”(Qur’an 109:6)).

Not only does ISIS deform and defy specific Islamic legal rules, the group’s goals and means of achieving them are diametrically opposite to Islam’s affirmative objectives. The five “higher objectives” of Islamic Law, according to the centuries-old consensus of qualified Islamic jurists, are the preservation of the Islamic faith, human life, progeny, the faculty of reason, and material wealth. One needn’t be an Islamic scholar to see the radical discordance between ISIS’ conduct and Islam’s objectives—ISIS has assailed Islam, taken human life, destroyed families, polluted minds, and thieved wealth.

Where, *truly*, is the Islam in the “Islamic State”?

The fate of ISIS’ reputed leader remains uncertain. His status, while politically and tactically consequential, has no inherent religious significance. As amply demonstrated by its conduct and cataclysmic “ideology,” ISIS’ “Islam” is stagecraft designed to cloak its existence in religious meaning.

Those Muslims and non-Muslims who *genuinely* believe that ISIS is an unadulterated outgrowth of Islam should make even minimal efforts to acquaint themselves with the true Islam of the Qur’an and Sunnah, rather than the phantasm of ISIS [tweets](#), [Hollywood knockoff](#) productions, and [video game-inspired](#) propaganda. They will discover that ISIS’ Islam is as fake as the name “Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi” and the sham “caliphate” over which the group’s lead actor purports to preside.

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*Note: Quotations of the Qur’an are from Abdulla Yusuf Ali, The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an (Amana Publications, 11th ed. 1425 AH/2004 CE). Parentheticals appearing frequently above are acronyms of English transliterations or translations of Arabic phrases that are customarily spoken or written as follows: (swt) after Allah (God) meaning “glorious and exalted is He”; (pbuh) after the Prophet Mohammed meaning “peace be upon him”; and (ra) after Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (and other noted men and women in Islamic history) meaning “may Allah (God) be pleased with him [or her].”*