



IRAQ/SYRIA

Everyone is familiar with the name, but who exactly is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group? His name is Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai, or Sheik Ibrahim, of Samarra, Iraq. He is 44 years old, and attended the Sunni mosque of Haji Zeidan, located in northwest Baghdad. Baghdadi has two wives and six children. His family lives within the territories controlled by the IS, but they do not travel together. Baghdadi has three brothers, one who acts as his bodyguard, another with whom he disagrees and has no contact, and a third, who has serious medical problems and is currently incarcerated by Iraqi authorities. After attending University in Baghdad, al-Baghdadi became a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood. In 2000, he decided that the Brotherhood was an organization of words as opposed to action, and he decided to pursue a more confrontational path. In 2004, al-Baghdadi was arrested while visiting a friend with Al-Qaeda connections. He had just graduated with a Master's Degree in Islamist Studies from the Iraq University in Baghdad. Al-Baghdadi was detained at Camp Ronald Bucca, where he participated in religious activities and associated with numerous

members of the jihadi movement. Following his release, al-Baghdadi was assisted by Al-Qaeda to travel to Syria and concentrate on his extremist writings, as long as he was willing to assist Al-Qaeda with any media-related projects. In 2006, al-Baghdadi finished his Doctorate in Quranic Studies with a specialization in Phonetics. Also in 2006, Al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had a 500-lb. bunker-buster bomb dropped on his lap, and his organization was in need of a replacement. Al-Baghdadi was chosen, and the name of the organization was changed to the Islamic State of Iraq, even though it was still an affiliate of Al-Qaeda. It wasn't until the 2010 death of Osama bin-Laden that al-Baghdadi began to differentiate his organization from Al-Qaeda. Al-Baghdadi had been having tremendous success recruiting fighters to his cause, and the Arab Spring was beginning to take shape. Creating a rift with Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Baghdadi changed the name of the organization to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. It was also at this time that al-Baghdadi's sermons became more prolific and he started preaching about the rebirth of a Caliphate. Since that time, the organization has experienced considerable growth in prestige, equipment and recruits. The name has changed a



few times, and al-Baghdadi was almost killed in a bombing raid in Iraq. He has since consolidated his authority and adopted a more international approach, developing contacts with various other Islamic extremist groups from Nigeria to Somalia and Yemen. After having come close to death during the bombing in Iraq, al-Baghdadi has become markedly more secretive in his movements and communications.

IRAQ/IRAN/YEMEN

The Iranian presence in Iraq continues to cause concern for the Persian Gulf States, especially following the recent military successes. The Iraqi media has played up the fact that the Iraqi Security Forces appeared to be ineffective with U.S. training, guidance, and air support, but the Iranian assistance has met with almost immediate success. This development has caused headaches for the United States which is trying to build a Sunni/Shi'a military coalition in Iraq, to defeat the Islamic State threat. As the glory of the battlefield falls more and more on the shoulders of the Shi'a militia, there is real concern that the Sunni leaders will begin to consider alignment with the Sunni-based Islamic State to be preferable to an Iranian puppet-government in Baghdad. The greatest criticism has been leveled at the United States for

the manner in which it continues to conduct the air campaign against the IS. In order to keep up the appearance of a coalition, the Pentagon has allowed the Gulf States to opt-out of certain raids and operations of their choice. This has led to accusation of sympathy between certain Gulf monarchies and particular groups on the ground in Syria. As Iran continues to discreetly increase its influence and presence in Iraq, Tehran has also stepped up support for the Houthi movement in Yemen. Since defeating the previous Sunni-affiliated government in Sana'a, the Houthi have demanded that the International Community recognize their authority and legitimacy. Houthi authorities are doing their best to continue services and consolidate their control over the nation's infrastructure. They hope to demonstrate that they are not a client state of Iran and that western nations should return to their embassies and NGOs return to continue their efforts. Unfortunately, a large part of southern Yemen is occupied by Al-Qaeda and Sunni groups loyal to Al-Qaida. As the Houthis attempt to return stability to the capital, U.S. drones can be heard heading towards Al-Qaeda-controlled areas, hoping to find some terrorists to kill. In reality, the Iranians remain deeply interested in events in Yemen, not only because the Houthis are Shi'a, but because developments in Sana'a have aggravated the Saud



monarchy in Riyadh. No doubt the Saudis consider Yemen to be within their security perimeter and won't hesitate to act if Saudi interests are threatened. Fortunately, that appears unlikely at present.

IRAN/USA

The Obama Administration and the Iranian government of Hassan Rouhani in Tehran (as opposed to the Iranian government of Prime Minister Ayatollah Ali Khamenei that sits in Qom) are currently conducting highly sensitive negotiations regarding continued Iranian nuclear research. The recent military developments in Yemen and Iraq have created unwelcome complications to the highly secretive meetings. The Obama Administration will have great difficulty getting the U.S. public to swallow the idea of a peaceful and trustworthy Iran if the media is disseminating stories of Iranian involvement in Iraq and Yemen. Iranian activities in Iraq, which are seen as damaging to U.S. influence and efforts, are particularly frustrating. Behind the scenes, TFG continues to hear that the agreement is a fait accompli, that the negotiators were instructed not to return without a signed treaty. The Obama Administration has noticed that the clock is ticking, and any opportunities to improve the Obama

Legacy are definite diplomatic priorities. If the Obama Administration presents a highly-flawed treaty to the American people, which in effect gives the Iranians the authority to verify and inspect their own programs, and at the same time, Iranian efforts in Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon are at odds with U.S. policy, then this initiative could very well have an unintended impact on the Obama Legacy.

SPAIN/FRANCE

Evidence continues to be collected by French authorities regarding last week's crash of a Germanwings Airbus 320 in the French Alps. The German, French and Spanish government have all gone on record as identifying the German Co-Pilot Anton Lubitz, as being responsible for the disaster which took the lives of all 150 persons on board. Authorities continue to discover evidence that Lubitz was suffering from severe depression and possibly other psychological concerns. Germanwings is the low-fare carrier for German flag-carrier Lufthansa, and serves over seventy destinations in Europe. It has an excellent safety record, but the issue in this circumstance has more to do with the condition of the co-pilot as it does the condition of the airplane. This tragedy occurs as the European Airline Industry prepares for what it hopes will be a record-setting summer, with



numerous new low-fare carriers active, especially in Eastern Europe. When the news of this tragedy started to filter in, there were serious concerns in Paris, Madrid and Berlin, that this might be a terrorist action. Although that concern has apparently been alleviated, the damage may have been done. Only time will tell if this incident will impact European's flying habits.

NIGERIA

Nigerians go to the polls on March 28, 2015, to either re-elect People's Democratic Party (PDP) candidate President Goodluck Jonathan, or to put into office former General and Junta leader All Progressive Congress (APC) candidate Muhammadu Buhari. Although most analysts consider the race too close to call, TFG believes that Buhari is in position to win comfortably. Buhari is a northerner and a Muslim, but recently, he has made inroads in traditionally PDP territory, including Lagos. Although the PDP has made less-than-discreet efforts to turn the election into a referendum on the problems in the Muslim north, the high-unemployment and the government's almost comical inability to combat Boko Haram has received more media attention. In the grand tradition of African politics in general, the PDP has used every branch of government to campaign for

itself. The PDP even went so far as to attempt to trick Moroccan King Mohammed VI into visiting Nigeria at a time when it could be exploited to appeal to Muslim voters. The King was not pleased. For Buhari to be victorious, it will take more than the support of the majority of the voters. The PDP has spent a record amount of money, both in front of and behind the scenes. The Boko Haram situation in the north will allow the military to possibly insert itself in various ways, including into the collection of ballot boxes (for security), which could delay the final count for days. What will be of most concern will be the response of APC supporters, if Jonathan is re-elected. Lagos in particular will probably see riots and violent demonstrations. Fortunately, as far as western investors and oil execs are concerned, the Port Harcourt area and its general vicinity will vote in high percentages for the ruling party. The former Delta Bandits have been more-or-less co-opted by the PDP, and they do not want to see any disturbance in the status quo. With the exception of gas deliveries to the north, TFG does not anticipate the Nigerian election to have any impact on the regular business of the petroleum industry. Of course, this prediction does not take into account the long-term impact of a destabilized political system, similar to what occurred in Cote d'Ivoire in the last decade.



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