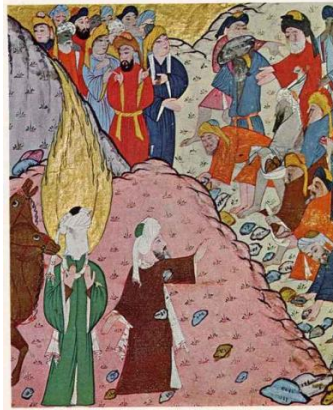




In the summer of 2014, a Muslim jihadist called Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—head of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria (also known as ISIS)—edges the country of Iraq closer to the brink of civil war.

Transforming terrorist cells nearing extinction into a powerful force, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi seems to have in mind a modern caliphate. An alternative name for his organization is ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant). Not only did he sack Iraq's largest northern city—the strategically key town of Mosul located at the intersection of Iraq, Turkey and Syria (which was also conquered by Alexander the Great)—he has brought a nation-sized area of Iraq under his control.

By August of 2014, ISIS forces are within striking distance of Baghdad's airport. Ethnic minorities, without protection from inside or outside forces, face a bleak future when they are told to "convert or die." Conversion, for the Yazidis, is an impossible choice.

Ali Khedery, an American who was once the longest-serving U.S. representative in Iraq but now heads Dubai-based Dragoman Partners, expresses grave concerns about the future of the country:

Iraq is spiralling out of control. The centrifugal forces are spinning so quickly. They are on one time line and Washington is on another. I am beyond concerned.

Everybody is retreating to their corners. And there is no credible international actor that I can see that is trying to bring it together again.

It definitely is an existential threat to the Iraqi government and I think it represents yet another manifestation of the disintegration of Iraq as we know it...Now we are locked in a race to the bottom.

Not much is known about Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, personally, leading the French news journal *Le Monde* to call him the "invisible jihadist."

If we examine the name he has chosen, however, perhaps we can learn something about him (or his motives). It's the "Abu Bakr" part which may provide the clues.

Abu Bakr of the 7th century—a person extremely important in the history of Islam—was the Prophet Muhammad's first successor. Earlier in his life, Abu Bakr ("The Owner of Camels") was called Abdullah ibn Abi Quhafa. Very close to Muhammad, Abu Bakr was also his confidant and father-in-law. He was one of the earliest converts to Islam.

When Muhammad died, a group of people accepted Abu Bakr as the first "deputy of the Prophet of God" (or "Caliph"). Another group of believers preferred that Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib - more commonly known simply as Ali—should be Caliph. Ali ultimately submitted to Abu Bakr's leadership (but became a Caliph later).

As Caliph, Abu Bakr successfully brought all of Central Arabia under Muslim control. Beyond Arabia, he also spread the Islamic faith by means of conquest. History credits him with a directive he gave to Muslim soldiers:

*Never kill a woman, nor a child, nor an elderly person; never cut a fruit-bearing tree; never destroy an inhabited place, never slaughter a sheep nor a camel except only for food; never burn nor inundate a palm-tree; and neither be revengeful nor cowardly. (See *The Shari'a and Islamic Criminal Justice in Time of War and Peace*, by M. Cherif Bassiouni, at page xi.)*

It was also Abu Bakr who wanted the words of the Prophet to be preserved in a written document, leading to the Koran.

When he was in his 60s, Abu Bakr died. His cause of death is not clear. Some accounts suggest that he was poisoned, but others suggest that he died of natural causes.

Believing that he was close to death, Abu Bakr chose his successor. Instead of picking Ali, he appointed a man

called Umar:

In the name of Most Merciful God. This is the last will and testament of Abu Bakr bin Abu Quhafa, when he is in the last hour of the world, and the first of the next; an hour in which the infidel must believe, the wicked be convinced of their evil ways, I nominate Umar bin al Khattab as my successor. Therefore, hear to him and obey him.

If he acts right, confirm his actions. My intentions are good, but I cannot see the future results. However, those who do ill shall render themselves liable to severe account hereafter. Fare you well. May you be ever attended by the Divine favor of blessing.

Although Abu Bakr chose a successor, leading to a tradition of government by chosen selection, that process was challenged just a few generations later.

After internal rivalries resulted in strife and even war, the Islamic faith split into two factions. The "Sunni" continue to follow the Caliphs while the "Shi'ite" (who believe that Ali was Muhammad's proper heir) only follow leaders descended from him.

Muslims today are still divided between Sunni and Shi'ite.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has taken the name of the first Caliph, the man whose remains rest beside those of Muhammad in Medina (underneath the Green Dome of the Prophet's Mosque).

A Sunni, whose religious traditions follow those of the First Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi also claims to be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. One is left to wonder: Does that mean he sees himself as a bridge between Sunni and Shi'ite? Or ... does that, in part, help to explain his growing power base?

The future will likely answer those questions. Meanwhile, we can be sure of one thing. There is power in a name, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's choice of name communicates a message which cannot be underestimated.

The image, depicted above, was created by an unknown 16th-century Turkish artist. It depicts Abu Bakr—later known by several titles, including Rightly-Guided Caliph, Warrior, Reformer, Siddiq, Disciple of Muhammad, Companion of the Cave—protecting Muhammad.

A mob, in Mecca, had turned against the Prophet, then planned to stone him. Abu Bakr stopped that from happening.

Today, in Iraq, ISIS forces are turning against people in that country. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi wants to be sure no one stops that from happening.

His gains on the ground have been impressive while his control over a large area of the Middle East—not to mention his ability, and that of ISIS, to recruit young men from numerous countries—is frightening.

Credits:

Image, described above, online via Wikimedia Commons.

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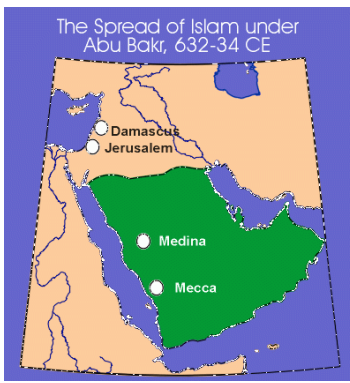
See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Abu-Bakr-and-ISIS-Background-of-a-Jihadi-s-Name>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Abu-Bakr-and-ISIS-Background-of-a-Jihadi-s-Name>

Media Stream

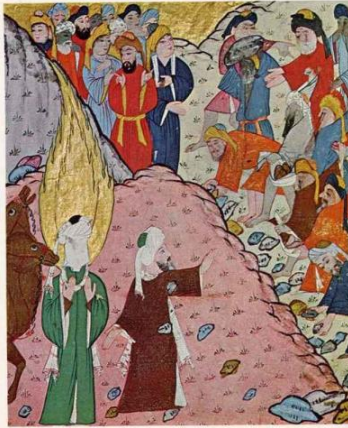


Spread of Islam Under Abu Bakr 632-634 C.E.

Map, described above, from an online book entitled "The Islamic World to 1600," by the Department of History, University of Calgary.

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Abu Bakr and ISIS - Background of a Jihadi's Name

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