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ISIS Announces New State in Iraq, Syria; Names Leader Caliph

By Jason Ditz

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Reflecting its virtually uncontested control over a broad swath of land in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has announced the formation of a new nation, dubbed simply The Islamic State (TIS). According to the announcement, TIS has been determined by Shura councils to be the “restoration of the Caliphate,” and ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has been declared the Caliph.

While TIS has been a de facto state for quite some time, albeit one with ill-defined borders engaged in multiple wars, the declaration of themselves as the new Caliphate is likely to fuel controversy around the world, and a direct challenge to Islamist factions.

That's because a Caliphate claims to be the direct successor of the Prophet Muhammad, and its Caliph would at least claim to be the consensus final religious authority for all of Sunni Islam.

Caliphates have a long history across the Middle East, with dominant Caliphates ruling significant territory and wielding broad influence through much of history. For centuries, Ottoman sultans also held the position of Caliph. In 1924, Turkey dissolved the institution of Caliphate, and there has been no consensus Caliph since. In recent decades several Islamist factions have called for the restoration of the Caliphate, though naturally each has envisioned itself at the head, and none has gained anywhere near this much traction.

With the declaration, ISIS is making an enormous power play, aiming to put itself formally in command of all "faithful" Sunnis on a religious level. While that's unlikely to matter across the broader Sunni world, except as a slap in the face, among Salafist factions like al-Qaeda this is a direct challenge, and a call for al-Qaeda and other such factions to submit to a position under Baghdadi's rule.