Comparative Psychological Profiles: Baghdadi & Zawahiri (Maj Jason Spitaletta, USMCR, Joint Staff J7 & The Johns Hopkins University-Applied Physics Laboratory)

Abstract

An underlying assumption of what intelligible characteristics make the Islamic State magnetic was that the charisma of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-appointed Caliph, was significantly greater than that of Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the successor to Osama Bin Laden and the current emir of Al Qaeda. Expedient comparative psychological profiles of each leader were generated using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Baghdadi may be a high value target (HVT), but is not likely a high payoff target (HPT). While he is likely to be perceived as more charismatic than Zawahiri, the relative charisma of a leader may not necessarily translate into lower-level recruitment. Furthermore, charisma is subjective, as different communities possess varied expectations from their leaders. While he has been elevated in stature by the political rhetoric (namely the work of Adnani), Baghdadi’s Islamic State is not a cult of personality, however, and their structure may be less vulnerable to decapitation than other groups with more charismatic leaders.

Introduction

One of the questions posed to the OSD-SMA network was what were the intangible qualities of the Islamic State (ISIL) that made them so magnetic. An immediate assumption that underlies the subsequent research was that the charisma of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi (Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al Badri al Samarrai) the self-appointed Caliph of the Islamic State was significantly greater than that of Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the successor to Osama Bin Laden and the current emir of Al Qaeda. Individual charisma is often necessary to begin a revolution as the risk required of underground operations necessitates a leader who is regularly able to motivate and provide justification for such risk (Bos et al., 2013). Charismatic authority rests on a commanding devotion to an individual’s sacrosanct character and the concomitant normative patterns of behavior (Weber, 2009). Charismatic leadership is the result of a unique personality and/or experience that differentiate a leader from those around him or her (Yuki, Gordon, & Taber, 2002) and that these extraordinary characteristics are often regarded by followers as exemplary and/or divine in nature (Weber, 2009). Charismatic leaders often visionaries who demonstrate some combination of emotionality, activity, sensitivity to the sociopolitical landscape, intense interest in and empathy toward their followers, superior rhetorical and persuasive skills, and exemplary behavior in the form of sacrificing their personal ambitions to those of the movement (Bos et al., 2013).

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Methods

While there is scant biographical data on Baghdadi, there is sufficient information to on Zawahiri to serve as a comparison and/or rule out certain characteristics. Much of the information on Zawahiri was the result of an Integrated Personality Profile of Zawahiri using Post’s (2005) approach that was incorporated into a chapter on underground leadership in Bos et al. (2013). To the extent possible, similar methods were used for Baghdadi, but the sources were limited to media reporting along with some more in-depth analysis such as that of Ligon et al. (2014) and Barrett (2014). To help contextualize the comparison, a quantitative approach to Integrative Complexity Scoring using ProfilerPlus software was employed for eight Baghdadi speeches (4/8/13-11/13/14) totaling 16554 words, five Zawahiri speeches where ISIL was mentioned (6/9/13-5/24/14) totaling 7300 words, and five Adnani speeches (6/19/13-9/22/14) totaling 30636 words. Integrative Complexity (IC) scoring proceeds on a 1–7 scale with 7 indicating the highest degree of complexity in a selection of text (Suedfeld, 2010). Each speech was analyzed by paragraphs, multiple IC scores were averaged, and the resultant mean and standard deviation were assigned to the speech. Automated approaches to IC scoring have methodological limitations, namely the tendency to elevate scores, but ProfilerPlus is nonetheless a valid means of coding and calculating scores for large amounts of data (Suedfeld & Tetlock, 2014).

In addition to IC, ProfilerPlus was also used to analyze a select set of leadership traits based on Hermann’s (2002) typology. Hermann (2002) identified seven traits in assessing leadership style and her approach to Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) is a useful tool in developing psychological profiles of individuals to whom researchers do not have direct access:

1. Belief in Control Over Events (BACE)-Degree of control the target perceives over the environment, akin to self-efficacy.
2. Need for Power (NFP)-Degree of target's concern for establishing, maintaining, or restoring one’s power and/or control, influence, or have an impact on other persons or groups.
3. Conceptual Complexity (CC)-Degree of differentiation that the target demonstrates in describing or discussing other people, places, policies, ideas, or things.
4. Self-Confidence (SC)-The target’s sense of self-importance or image of his or her ability to cope adequately with objects and persons in the environment.
5. Task Orientation (TO)-The target’s relative emphasis on interactions with others when dealing problems as opposed to focusing on the feelings and needs of relevant and important constituents.
6. Distrust (D)-Wariness about others or the degree of the target’s suspicion of the motives and actions of others.
7. In-Group Bias (IGB)-A worldview in which one’s own group (social, political, ethnic, etc.) holds prominence, is perceived as superior, and/or there are strong emotional attachments to this in-group.
Results

A thorough account of the results of the comparative profiles is beyond the scope of this section; however, brief summaries are included on both Zawahiri and Baghdadi. Zawahiri has exhibited narcissistic, obsessive-compulsive, and paranoid personality traits but not to the degree that would meet the clinical criteria for a disorder (Bos et al., 2013). He presents as contentious/oppositional and dominant/controlling, with secondary features of the dauntless/dissenting and ambitious/self-serving (Bos et al., 2013). His abrasively negativistic (or passive-aggressive) personality manifests in an insecure yet overbearing style that is intolerant of dissention (Bos et al., 2013), something quite evident in his June 9, 2013 rebuke of Baghdadi. Zawahiri is a respected, but divisive figure in the global Salafist insurgency (Bos et al., 2013)—a trend that has migrated from private conversations amongst underground groups (Spitaletta, 2012) to social media (Chin & Kluver, 2014). Zawahiri tends to speak from an ideological/moral high ground but does not dominate the terrain the way his on-camera persona would indicate.

In fact, Zawahiri has demonstrated fairly poor management skills first with Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) (Spitaletta, 2012) and later al Qaeda (Spitaletta & Marshall, 2012) and has demonstrated little operational credibility who seemed more comfortable serving as the power behind the throne (Bos et al., 2013). The most important relationship in Zawahiri’s life is that with the idealized figure of Sayyid Qutb. Qutb’s character, binary worldview, and steadfast devotion to Islamic principles caused the ambitious Zawahiri to identify with Qutb as a surrogate father figure to emulate and to which he continually aspires. Zawahiri is currently dealing the crisis of ego integrity versus despair (Erikson, 1980) at the end of ones’ life yet seems uncomfortable ceding control of AQ of the global Salafist insurgency to others; however, options are limited.

Compared to Zawahiri, much less is known about Baghdadi. One version of Baghdadi’s biography holds that he was born in Samarra in 1971 and educated at the Islamic University in Baghdad before moving to Fallujah to serve as an assistant Imam (Barrett, 2014). The Islamic State’s version claims that Abu Bakr holds a doctorate in Islamic Science and served as an Imam in both Samarra and Fallujah prior to 2003 US invasion prior to co-founding Jamaat Jaysh Ahl al Sunnah before being imprisoned in Camp Bucca in 2004 (Barrett, 2014). Imprisonment is often a seminal experience in a revolutionary leader’s life (Bos et al., 2013), and it appears to be the same for Baghdadi and his Shura Council (Thomson & Suri, 2014). Post (2004) identified that an individual does not become a leader until he or she encounters his followers and Camp Bucha seems to have hosted that encounter for Baghdadi (McCoy, 2014). His speeches are rife with the notion of oppression/emasculation by tyrants with allusion to his (and ISIL leadership’s) experience being imprisoned by the US.

Analysis of Baghdadi’s speeches indicates that he is respectful, but not supplicant, toward Zawahiri and considers himself more a successor to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the former emir of Al Qaeda (AQ) in Iraq. There is an underlying theme of Oedipal tension between ISIL as the son to AQ’s father; the specific manifestation is evident in Baghdadi’s interaction with Zawahiri. In this case, the underlying tension of Baghdadi that manifests in him overcoming the authoritarian Zawahiri is projected onto Sunni males who are attempting to overcome their oppressors.
(Fuchsman, 2004). While extrapolating a bit beyond the data, ISIL’s ritualization of decapitation (Bunker, 2014) and its inclusion in their messaging (Kuznar, 2014) might also be an implicit communication from Baghdadi to Zawahiri, who condemned such barbarity when used by al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Bos et al., 2013). Zawahiri’s 2005 letter to Zarqawi reveals not only some of the aforementioned personality traits of the former but also a degree of Machiavellian leadership, to which Baghdadi may currently be reacting. Zawahiri’s acknowledgment of the populace as the center of gravity of the global Salafist jihad indicates the need, at least somewhat, to retain popular support. In directing Zarqawi, Zawahiri acknowledges the limitation of proselytizing by force as well as the risk of imposing one’s religion, in this case on Shia Muslims in Iraq (Bos et al., 2013). That Baghdadi perceives ISIL to be an extension of AQI under Zarqawi and not subordinate to Zawahiri’s organization lends support to this hypothesis. Finally, the theme of lions, prominent in Islamic extremist organizations (CTC, 2006), overcoming tyrants is an appeal to an ISIL ideal masculinity—the Sunni Muslim who risks his life for the betterment of the Caliphate and the Umma. This particularly theme resonates with males across lifespan and psychological vulnerabilities.

Baghdadi showed a mean IC of 1.76 (SD=1.59), a median score of 1.51, with the modal code between 1-2 (98) along with 6 paragraphs greater than 5. Overall, he demonstrated a decreasing trend in IC until the most recent speech. With the addition of the 11/13/14 speech, his trend in IC flattens. He demonstrated more first-person plural usage than Zawahiri, lending support to Ligon et al. (2014) finding that he is a more socialized leader. His tone seems to shift with 6/15/13 refusal to adhere to Zawahiri’s ruling, with a generally negative trend bottoming out on 1/19/14 with a mean IC of 1.12. The next three speeches showed slight increases (still lower than the first) with the highest IC evidenced in the most recent. A decreasing IC trend generally suggests an increased likelihood for increasing violence as drops in IC predicts violent conflict between groups (Suedfeld, 2010). It is unclear, however, what affect the trauma of the recent airstrike that may or may not have injured Baghdadi had on his IC. Zawahiri’s mean IC 1.92 (SD=1.42) was higher than that of Baghdadi. His median IC was 1.84 with the modal code between 1-2 (47) and no paragraphs greater than 5. His initial speech (6/19/13) was directive and had the lowest mean IC (1.45) of all his analyzed comments, He used less forceful and less directive language afterward and showed an increasing trend in IC. An increasing trend in IC is consistent with many revolutionary leaders (Suedfeld & Rank, 1976); however, given the relatively narrow window of analysis (11 months) and limited data (five speeches in which the Islamic State was mentioned) there is insufficient evidence to suggest Zawahiri’s increasing IC is indeed indicative of that trend. Adnani exhibited the highest and most consistent IC with a mean of 2.12 (SD=1.62) over the period analyzed. His median score was 1.84 with the modal code between 1-2 (140) and 14 paragraphs scored greater than 5. As Kuznar (2014) indicates, Adnani’s language is metaphor-rich and verbose with an average word count per speech double that of Baghdadi. If public comments are representative of internal mental processes, Baghdadi appears more self-assured and certain after the confrontation. Zawahiri does not necessarily accept the idea of the establishment of a caliphate; however, he has not persisted (publically) in
direct refutations of Baghdadi. Figure 1 depicts the mean IC and standard deviations of each speech of Baghdadi, Zawahiri, and Adnani for the period covered.

![Comparison of ProfilerPlus Integrative Complexity Scores Amongst Bagdhadi, Adnani, & Zawahiri (June 2013-November 2014)](image)

**Figure 1.** Plot of mean ProfilerPlus Integrative Complexity scores for Baghdadi, Zawahiri, and Adnani from March 2013 through November 2014

The same corpus that was used to code IC was used to code the LTA variables described earlier for both Baghdadi and Zawahiri. The seven different LTA scores for Baghdadi and Zawahiri were quite similar suggesting comparable word choice and patterns within their comments. This was somewhat counterintuitive and, given the other observable differences in psychological characteristics, necessitates caution when interpreting these findings. The most pronounced differences between the two were in their subjective Belief in Control Over Events (BACE) with Baghdadi slightly below the mean (in the normal range) and Zawahiri being low. Of note were two particularly low comments (1/23/14 and 2/3/14) by Zawahiri that drove down his mean BACE. Zawahiri also exhibited low Self-Confidence (SC) in those two selections, potentially suggesting recognition of the limits of his authority. Again, the LTA results should be interpreted with caution.
Table 1. Brief description of Hermann’s (2002) Leadership Traits along with a comparison of ProfilerPlus Baghdadi and Zawahiri with 87 Heads of State.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Norms</th>
<th>Baghdadi</th>
<th>Zawahiri</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Complexity</td>
<td>Degree of differentiation that the target demonstrates in describing</td>
<td>Mean=0.44</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.62</td>
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<td>(CC)</td>
<td>or discussing other people, places, policies, ideas, or things.</td>
<td>Low &lt; 0.37</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High &gt; 0.62</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Belief in Control Over</td>
<td>Degree of control the target perceives over the environment, akin to self-</td>
<td>Mean=0.44</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events (BACE)</td>
<td>efficacy.</td>
<td>Low &lt; 0.30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High &gt; 0.58</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Confidence (SC)</td>
<td>The target’s sense of self-importance, or image of his or her ability to</td>
<td>Mean=0.62</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.13</td>
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<td></td>
<td>cope adequately with objects and persons in the environment.</td>
<td>Low &lt; 0.44</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High &gt; 0.81</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Task Orientation (TO)</td>
<td>The target’s relative emphasis on interactions with others when dealing</td>
<td>Mean=0.59</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.47</td>
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<td></td>
<td>problems as opposed to focusing on the feelings and needs of relevant and</td>
<td>Low &lt; 0.46</td>
<td></td>
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<td>important constituents.</td>
<td>High &gt; 0.71</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distrust (D)</td>
<td>Wariness about others or the degree of the target’s suspicion of the</td>
<td>Mean=0.41</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
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<td></td>
<td>motives and actions of others.</td>
<td>Low &lt; 0.25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High &gt; 0.56</td>
<td></td>
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<td>In-Group Bias (IGB)</td>
<td>A worldview in which one’s own group (social, political, ethnic, etc.)</td>
<td>Mean=0.42</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.22</td>
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<td></td>
<td>holds prominence is perceived as superior, and/or there are strong emotional</td>
<td>Low &lt; 0.32</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>attachments to this in-group.</td>
<td>High &gt; 0.63</td>
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<tr>
<td>Need for Power (NFP)</td>
<td>Degree of target’s concern for establishing, maintaining, or restoring</td>
<td>Mean=0.50</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.30</td>
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<td></td>
<td>one’s power and/or control, influence, or have an impact on other persons</td>
<td>Low &lt; 0.37</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>or groups.</td>
<td>High &gt; 0.62</td>
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Discussion

There are numerous methodological limitations that constrain some of the findings. Among them include the restriction to unclassified sources only on both the Zawahiri and Baghdadi profiles. For the Zawahiri profile specifically, it was updated to include the discourse with Baghdadi, but the source material heavily weighted to pre-2011 assumption of power after Bin Laden’s death. Finally, the lack of information on Baghdadi and/or temporal constraints biases analysis toward what he is not (e.g. Zawahiri) instead of what the data suggests he is. Limitations in IC scoring include the reliance open sources, which are perhaps less revealing than other forms of communication. The automated scoring through ProfilerPlus, while less laborious, must also be considered less precise. Nevertheless, the use of automated text analyses on a larger corpus of data can be a valid means of independently corroborating the hand-scored text. The comparative profiles should be considered preliminary at best, and thus confidence in the assessment is low to moderate. Further analysis would be required to increase the confidence level in any specific conclusion.

Despite the preliminary nature of these findings, there is some operational utility. ISIL’s thematic content (Kuznar, 2014), particularly in Adnani’s comments, and their desired target audience indicate multiple risk factors for radicalization (Crossett & Spitalaetta, 2010). ISIL targets adolescents (identity versus role confusion), young adults (intimacy versus isolation), and middle adulthood (generativity versus stagnation) (Erikson, 1980). The continuity of message across multiple demographics (males 12-18,19-39,40-65) and psychological vulnerabilities makes for a
coherent master narrative. The ISIL narrative is not novel, but it is compelling; ISIL leaders have a nuanced understanding of their desired target audiences. Whether it was their collective experience in prison or their current tactical success, the ISIL leadership understands and is able to articulate the strength of the bonds created on the frontlines of such a conflict. While Whitehouse and colleagues (2014) recent research is on Libyan revolutions, the strength of the social relationships cultivated in conflicts is powerful, particularly to those resolving the conflict of intimacy versus isolation in young adulthood (Erikson, 1980). Currently, their actions align with their rhetoric (specifically the success theme), which increases their credibility. Baghdadi (and ISIL leadership) is likely dealing with the crisis of generativity versus stagnation; the question of how to make their lives count (Erikson, 1980). Their significant relationships are with one another and seem to recognize that amongst Sunni males of the same generation. Projecting these crises unto Sunni males seems to resonate, possibly by humanizing the ISIL leadership in a way Zawahiri avoided.

Baghdadi may be a high value target (HVT), but is not likely a high payoff target (HPT). While he has been elevated in stature by the political rhetoric (namely the work of Adnani) Baghdadi’s Islamic State is not a cult of personality, however, and their structure may be less vulnerable to decapitation than other groups with more charismatic leaders. The smaller the group, the greater the impact a leader’s charisma can have on the group. Charismatic leadership is difficult to maintain, especially as movements grow larger. Charismatic leaders must accomplish these four functions: (1) maintain the public persona of the leader; (2) moderate the effects of the psychological identification of followers with the leader; (3) negotiate the routinization of charisma; and (4) achieve frequent new successes (Post, 2005). To address the first and second, charismatic leaders must be seen and heard from on a regular basis through both staged public displays and small appearances before regular members of the group. However, the leader must balance this exposure with an aura of mystery and in some cases a sense of supernatural power (to address the third issue, above), and this requires occasional segregation or isolation from his or her followers. Such isolation has the potential to stem negative feedback from group members; it can also lead to future decisions being made without the consideration of all necessary information and a subsequent failure and internal fracture over direction. Of course, public exposure entails greater security risks (Bos et al., 2013). Despite having a self-declared Caliph, ISIL may be less vulnerable to decapitation than other groups with more charismatic leaders. Baghdad is likely to be perceived as more charismatic than Zawahiri; however, the relative charisma of a leader may not necessarily translate into lower-level recruitment. Furthermore, charisma is subjective, as different communities possess varied expectations from their leaders. While public opinion (on Twitter) of Zawahiri was as varied as other forms of media, there was more widespread rejection of Baghdadi (Chin & Kluver, 2014). While Baghdadi may lack the charisma of more demonstrative revolutionary leaders, he and his leadership apparatus are likely more attractive to the younger generation of Islamic extremists than Zawahiri is.
References


