

Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi was in a bad mood. For months his ISIL forces had made mistake after costly mistake. The commanders would neither act nor take the initiative. The battles and progress to seize and control the oil fields and refineries were his only successes – yet that had come at a considerable cost and loss of forces.

The ability to capture the allegiance of the Syrian and Iraqi citizens, gain a ground swell of support, and topple Assad had no end in sight. Air attacks from the coalition forces impacted morale – desertions were high, and the long logistics trail made it more and more difficult to feed and protect his forces. Money was limited. Promises of donations sometimes didn't materialize. His military commanders were demoralized.

Russia was now engaged supporting Assad against the Syrian rebel forces. It was only a matter of time before Russia and Assad would turn their attention to ISIL to recover the oil fields and refineries.

Now this latest catastrophic disaster intensified his anger. His communications system was compromised and his most senior general had failed to take action to ensure communications security. "This must be how Lincoln felt," he thought. In response he had met early that morning with one of his most aggressive colonels and his Chief of Staff. They had devised a plan to shake up the military leaders to their very core.

Sitting in their command center, al-Baghdadi wore his usual black cleric robe and mask as his top military leaders and staff gave their reports. Several commanders had never seen his face. Others had. But none wanted to envision him as they had earlier that morning when al-Baghdadi ordered the public execution of his highest-ranking general.

Such executions that al-Baghdadi ordered were not unusual. But today, in a sadistic twist, al-Baghdadi made General Laka's family, as well as his commanders and staff, watch Laka's execution. As the execution progressed, few had dared to look into their leader's eyes. All who had done so were sorry they had for his eyes were an infinite void, as if one were looking into the gates of *Jahannam* (hell).

General Laka did not go quietly. As the executioner's blade began to cut Laka's neck, the executioner made a fatal mistake and briefly hesitated at the first sign of blood. Laka, with a display of considerable strength, struggled free of the soldiers who held him. Blood streaming down his massive chest and shoulders, he quickly spun around and wrestled the ceremonial scimitar from the astonished executioner.

Before anyone could react, Laka managed to inflict lethal blows to his would be executioner and one of the soldiers. Then the remaining soldier pulled his pistol and shot Laka in the chest. As Laka lay dying in the dust, his last words were, "*Ameen Ya Rab Ul Ameen* (Praise be to Allah, Lord of the World)."

As Laka's death throes subsided, al-Baghdadi called Laka's son up close to the dais where he sat.

“Your father was courageous. I offer you a gift to honor that courage. Do you wish to live? If so, I will give you a pistol and you must shoot your mother and sister,” the caliph said.

Laka’s son drew himself erect, looked al-Baghdadi in the eye, and spat on the sand in front of the dais.

He said, “A thousand curses on you. May pigs eat your entrails and fornicate and shit in your grave. My father was a brave and honorable soldier and even now he is crossing the bridge of Sirat. Kill me as you wish for I have no intention of entering into any games with you.”

Al-Baghdadi laughed, “You have your father’s courage, and for that I’ll make sure the death of your family is quick and humane.” He then ordered Laka’s family taken to the firing squad wall and shot.

Now, this afternoon, the Colonel called Firas was insulting the caliph. Not in any overt manner, but with subtle logic and mild decorum that all of the others in the room knew they’d never attempt. Such effrontery to the caliph was unheard of. In this aftermath of the caliph’s madness, they all wondered how Firas dared his impudence, insulting the caliph at one moment, and then, expertly manipulating his words, tone, and inflections to cajole and praise him in the next moment. He began finalizing his report with more criticism than any had ever heard uttered to the caliph directly – all wondered if Colonel Firas would soon join Laka.

Firas looked directly at the caliph, testing him with his lack of deference as he finished.

“Now that General Laka has left us, we need to fill his void. Certainly Laka was not careful in his oversight of our communications network. But he was an honest and devout believer and courageous soldier even as he was allowed to inflict an act of war prematurely by poor decisions from our staff.”

Firas looked at al-Baghdadi’s staff and senior military commanders with a hard stare, as if daring any one of them to speak up. Then he continued, “Perhaps Laka’s order to our brothers in Spain to test the delivery mechanism was premature. Yet it provided us with valuable information. We now know our most perfect detonator will work. We should reflect on this as we refine our plans, organize and gather our forces, and, when Allah reveals the time to us, use this force to recover our ancient homelands.

“Our communication system is imperfect. Something I might remind us all that General Laka advised us about many times. We are exploring introducing disinformation in our communications. To do this will be costly. Many of our holy fighters are uneducated and we must make sure they receive and understand the correct commands. Training and additional manpower must be employed to perfect this idea.”

Firas paused, first looking around the room, and then at al-Baghdadi as if daring him to speak. Slowly the caliph nodded, as if saying, “Get on with it.”

Firas concluded, “While the idea is good, exactly how should we begin this level of disinformation? The orders to restrict and monitor communications using internet cafes may have been premature. I’m afraid those orders and the temporary shutdown of the communication network has alerted British and American infidels that they have Islamic believers in their midst reporting to us. We must proceed in a manner that appears communications has returned to normal.”

Firas nodded to the staff and bowed to the caliph, but remained standing as was customary after anyone made a report.

The room remained silent. Everyone was sweating since the room’s air conditioner had again failed. The windows open in a feeble attempt to capture a cool breeze. No one touched their coffee or sweets as they all awaited the caliph to speak first as were the custom.

Finally al-Baghdadi eased himself slowly forward in his chair. He did not stand. His staff all knew his back still troubled him, but for anyone to speak of this would insult their caliph’s strength and infer his authority somehow diminished.

Six months ago one of al-Baghdadi’s compounds was bombed by a Predator drone. Shrapnel entered his back and partially paralyzed him for several months. Two operations removed the shrapnel, but he had yet to fully recover and was in constant pain.

“Cannot anyone counter the report that Colonel Firas just delivered in a most insulting tone? Have you all lost your manhood?”

All could hear the soft steady rain outside the open windows as Al-Baghdadi slowly surveyed the silent room. With a dismissive flick of his hand he motioned for Colonel Firas to sit. The use of his left hand as an insult to Firas was lost on no one, Firas included.

Al-Baghdadi continued, “We should all have the courage that General Laka finally displayed this morning. But remember, he was responsible and he failed. And for that he received his punishment.

“Colonel Firas has spoken to us all in a most insulting manner – perhaps many of you think he should be punished? He raises problems for which none of you have dared to put forward a solution. I have posed the same questions to many of you. Yet you have all failed me as General Laka did.” In this clever manner al-Baghdadi focused all of the insults against his staff and commanders and set himself above the criticism by agreeing with Colonel Firas.

Their caliph’s anger seethed as the humidity and oppressive heat made them sweat as if in a sauna. None rose to speak. After many moments of uncomfortable silence al-Baghdadi’s Chief of Staff rose. He was also an Iman and advised al-Baghdadi and the council on religious matters.

He spoke, “Your Excellency, it is true that none of us have answers to these problems. Colonel Firas reminds us of these problems most eloquently as he calls forth

the failures in our military leadership of our most holy jihad. I believe Colonel Firas has spoken truthfully and means no insults to you, Your Excellency. But as the Quran has taught us, we should listen and learn from the messages that Allah provides us. Perhaps the failure of our communication system was delivered to General Laka as a message. It appears General Laka failed to respond to this message. I believe Colonel Firas has been chosen by Allah to redeliver this message to all of us.”

Then, continuing the ploy that had been concocted that morning between him, al-Baghdahi, and Colonel Firas, he said, “To respond to this message from Allah, I suggest Colonel Firas be assigned the tasks that General Laka was responsible for and also be assigned as our Disinformation Officer. In order to ensure success in our holy jihad, I suggest Colonel Firas be promoted to General Commander over all military forces.”

The title General Commander was new to the military leaders. But its nuance was not. If al-Baghdadi agreed, Firas would become their supreme commander. The logic and plan to elevate Colonel Firas had come to al-Baghdadi as a message from Allah the previous evening as he read about Lincoln and General Grant.

It would ensure central coordination. No longer would his regional commanders operate autonomously. Colonel Firas was battlefield tested. He was aggressive, fearless, and always pressed his enemy. He, like General Grant, never retreated. But al-Baghdadi knew the suggestion must also come from their Iman and be blessed by him. Otherwise Firas would not have the full support of both Islamic religious and military law.

With a solemn nod from al-Baghdadi, Colonel Firas was now General Commander Firas. The commanders and staff in the room sweated even more as their fears doubled.

General Commander Firas, now second only to al-Baghdadi. The implications sank in. No one spoke. They knew this was not only a decision from al-Baghdadi, it was a divine aegis and sanction from the Iman. In one fell swoop, Firas now was anointed by their Iman as a prophet or messenger from Allah.

Al-Baghdadi looked at General Commander Firas and his eyes crinkled in a smile under his mask. The rain continued, almost a mist now. Yet the blood from General Laka and his family still stained the sand outside the command center.

