



## The Crisis in the Syrian Arena of Jihad

During the first half of April 2013, a rift was exposed between the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, and the Islamic State of Iraq, Al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq. The rift became clear after the cold response given by Abu Muhammad al-Golani, leader of the Al-Nusra Front, to the declaration by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State of Iraq, in which he unilaterally proclaimed a merger between the branches under the organization's leadership in Iraq. Following the declaration, al-Golani was quick to pledge allegiance directly to the leader of Al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in order to stress his devotion and subordination to the "parent" organization, first and foremost. In his pledge to al-Zawahiri, it was hard not to notice al-Golani's reservations regarding al-Baghdadi's action, since he [al-Golani] emphasized that he is not subordinate to any jihadist organization, but rather only to the leadership of Al-Qaeda.

Among supporters of Salafi-jihadism were those who viewed the declaration of unity described above as a positive development for global jihad. However, what seemed to be a stepping-stone on the path towards the vision of establishing an Islamic caliphate through joint jihad – turned out to be nothing more than an expression of patronage vis à vis the Al-Nusra Front by the Islamic State of Iraq. The fact that the Islamic State of Iraq was given a new name – The Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham – following the unification attempt in April also points to this expression of patronage. Since then, relations between the two groups have continued to deteriorate.<sup>1</sup>

During May 2013, an unusual development took place in the Syrian arena of jihad. Namely, many Al-Nusra Front fighters deserted its ranks and joined the Islamic State of Iraq.<sup>2</sup> The Al-Nusra Front was created as an offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) – some say, as early as the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, possibly the most prominent commander ever known of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, traveled from Afghanistan to Iraq via Iran. In the process, he gathered more fighters, who were later sent to Syria and Lebanon, where they successfully set up additional infrastructure for the Al-Qaeda terrorist network. Against the backdrop of the Arab Spring, which spread to Syria during March 2011, veteran fighters of AQI began to move into Syrian territory, intent on bringing down Bashar al-Assad's regime and replacing it with the Islamic Emirate of Al-Sham.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akolFvzpXTI>;  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyGhojXw8yU> (both in Arabic).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/17/us-syria-crisis-nusra-idUSBRE94G0FY20130517>;  
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/10/syria-al-nusra-front-jihadi> (both in English).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf> (English).

Nonetheless, it was reported in May 2013 that fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham had begun to invade Syrian territory in larger numbers and to supplant the Al-Nusra Front, which had begun to fall apart internally. While one part of the Al-Nusra Front is described as fulfilling Al-Qaeda's broad vision of establishing an Islamic Caliphate [State], another part is described as achieving the aims of Syrian nationalism by toppling Bashar al-Assad. Many Al-Nusra Front fighters even admitted to seeing themselves as Syrians, and explained that they had joined the group because it is more religious and less corrupt than other fighting regiments. This ideological split within the Al-Nusra Front (between supporters of the Islamist vision and supporters of Syrian nationalism) is inextricably linked to the deterioration of the Front's relationship with the Islamic State of Iraq, which strives to advance the Islamist vision.<sup>4</sup>

An Al-Nusra Front fighter said in an interview conducted in May that he believes that al-Baghdadi bore a grudge against al-Golani, due to the latter's having found favor in the eyes of many Syrians, especially the Christians. He explained that thanks to the close collaboration between the Al-Nusra Front and other jihadist groups – which manifests itself through warfare, assistance to refugees, control over looting, and so on – many Syrians have chosen to turn a blind eye to the increasing presence of jihadist Islamists of other nationalities on Syrian soil.

As opposed to al-Golani, al-Baghdadi has a dubious reputation and is considered by the Syrian people to be a brutal figure who is exploiting the civil war to impose Islamic law, establish shari'a courts and carry out public executions, rather than fighting only for the sake of overthrowing Bashar al-Assad. Therefore, it is no wonder that al-Baghdadi's declaration of unity was received coldly by al-Golani. It was meant to sabotage the connections made and efforts invested by al-Golani to secure a good reputation among the different echelons of Syrian society. An Al-Nusra Front activist described the situation as "the most dangerous development in the history of global jihad".<sup>5</sup>

According to media reports issued in May, thousands of fighters from the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham have been gathering in Idlib Province in northwestern Syria. There are those who claim that al-Baghdadi himself is in one of the cities in Aleppo Province, closely

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/17/us-syria-crisis-nusra-idUSBRE94G0FY20130517>; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10067318/Syria-Jabhat-al-Nusra-split-after-leaders-pledge-of-support-for-al-Qaeda.html> (both in English).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/17/us-syria-crisis-nusra-idUSBRE94G0FY20130517> (English).

following Al-Qaeda's operational activities in Syria along with former Al-Nusra Front fighters. In addition, al-Golani has gone underground until the crisis passes. One media report claimed that al-Baghdadi's supporters view those Al-Nusra Front fighters who have not joined them as heretics.<sup>6</sup>

### **Al-Zawahiri's Letter**

Figures within the Al-Nusra Front hoped that, in light of the crisis, Ayman al-Zawahiri, leader of Al-Qaeda, would decide to make order in the Syrian arena of jihad and cause al-Baghdadi's retreat back to Iraq. Indeed, on May 23, 2013, al-Zawahiri addressed his Syrian and Iraqi colleagues in a letter that was published by Al-Jazeera on June 9, 2013.<sup>7</sup>

In the letter, al-Zawahiri stressed that the main role of Muslims in general, and of the mujahideen in particular, was to thwart the plan of the Crusaders to conquer and divide the Muslim Nation, as well as to prevent the Shi'ites – who aspire to hegemony in Al-Sham – from spreading into Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula. Al-Zawahiri also noted that he had not made the decision to settle the dispute on his own, but rather had shared his opinion about messages received from the two rivals, as well as from other parties, and that he had consulted with his colleagues in Afghanistan and asked for Allah's supervision and guidance on the matter.

Al-Zawahiri ruled that al-Baghdadi had been wrong to declare the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham without permission from the leadership of Al-Qaeda, and without informing or consulting with it beforehand. The same was true of al-Golani, whom he rebuked for rejecting the unity initiative and exposing his ties to Al-Qaeda. When he finished pointing out each side's mistakes, al-Zawahiri called for the dissolution of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham, and a return to the Islamic State of Iraq in its previous form – in Iraq. In addition, he emphasized that the Al-Nusra Front was an independent jihadist entity located in Syria that complied with the leadership of Al-Qaeda. The two sides were asked to end their mutual animosity in word and in deed, and to once again help one another by providing weapons, money, shelter and protection. Furthermore, al-Zawahiri

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/17/us-syria-crisis-nusra-idUSBRE94G0FY20130517>  
(English)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/a5a7d33e-3c9f-4706-b070-e358b5e67236> (Arabic).

appointed Sheikh Abu Khalid al-Soury as Al-Qaeda's representative in Al-Sham, to settle disputes between the parties, should they arise, subject to Muslim law.<sup>8</sup>

Abu Khalid al-Soury's identity is not sufficiently clear. It is likely that he is Al-Qaeda activist Muhammad Bahayah, who was released from prison in Syria at the start of the uprising against Bashar al-Assad. Another possibility, according to the media, is that he is Abu Khalid, the close friend and confidant of Abu Musab al-Suri, a prominent Al-Qaeda ideologue who was among those recently released from prison in Syria.<sup>9</sup>

During the second half of June 2013, al-Baghdadi and Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, spokesman for the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham, expressed their clear opposition to al-Zawahiri's instructions regarding their return to Iraq.<sup>10</sup> This had an immediate effect on the discourse on jihadist Web forums. Most visitors to the forums responded to the matter by first defending al-Baghdadi's character, actions and motivations.<sup>11</sup> Others discussed the importance of unity among the mujahideen,<sup>12</sup> and a few of them believed that al-Zawahiri's letter was actually fake, pointing out (for instance) that it was published in writing and not in an audio file.<sup>13</sup> Either way, this was not the first time that the words of an Al-Qaeda leader had been rejected by his colleagues.

### **Disagreements and Splits within Al-Qaeda and Its Branches in the Periphery**

After the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, documents were found in his home citing expert opinions regarding al-Zawahiri's somewhat rebellious behavior toward Bin Laden, especially regarding Al-Qaeda's being a centralized organization. It was claimed that, in complete contrast to Bin Laden's philosophy, al-Zawahiri easily gave in to jihadist movements' requests to join the terrorist network. Researchers at West Point's Combating Terrorism Center estimate that al-Zawahiri was already bringing a number of groups under the organization's wing – without Bin Laden's approval – starting in the 2000s. They even

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<sup>8</sup> <http://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/710588/translation-of-ayman-al-zawahiris-letter.pdf> (English).

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/analysis\\_alleged\\_let.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/analysis_alleged_let.php) (English).

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/06/2013615172217827810.html> (English).

<http://alplatformmedia.com/vb> (Arabic).

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.hanein.info/vb> (Arabic).

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.as-ansar.com/vb> (Arabic).

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.hanein.info/vb> (Arabic).

raised the possibility that al-Zawahiri had behaved this way because he thought that Bin Laden would not publicly refute him.<sup>14</sup>

Regarding the current crisis between al-Zawahiri and al-Baghdadi, it should be noted that this is not the first time that the leadership of Al-Qaeda has faced problems with its counterparts in Iraq. The first meeting between Bin Laden and Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, leader and founder of AQI, has been described by intelligence agents as "disgust at first sight". Bin Laden disliked al-Zarqawi's arrogance, belligerence, and "un-Islamic" tattoos, as well as his deep hatred of the Shi'ites – since Bin Laden's mother was, and still is, a member of the Alawite community. While Bin Laden supported showcase terrorist attacks against the "distant enemy", such as the United States and Israel, al-Zarqawi specifically supported resistance against "the near enemy", such as "heretical" Muslim regimes.<sup>15</sup>

Even though he did not work things out with Bin Laden, al-Zarqawi received approximately \$5,000 from Al-Qaeda, with which he established his own training camps in the city of Herat in western Afghanistan. This was a turning point in his life; it was not only that he commanded authority – he also managed to create a reasonable and deliberate distance between himself and Bin Laden. The training camps in Herat were the only ones in all of Afghanistan that recruited volunteers to jihad – especially from Al-Sham – and it is said that al-Zarqawi nicknamed himself "The Emir [prince] of Al-Sham".

Between 2000-2001, Bin Laden invited al-Zarqawi to swear allegiance to him at least five times.<sup>16</sup> Only in October 2004, after extended and persistent negotiations, did al-Zarqawi accede to Bin Laden's request, and begin calling himself "The Emir of Al-Qaeda's Operations in the Land of Mesopotamia" in order to emphasize his subordination to Bin Laden, on the one hand, and his stance on advancing jihad on the global stage, on the other. Al-Zarqawi exploited Al-Qaeda's financial support, while Bin Laden exploited al-Zarqawi to demonstrate a presence in Iraq.

According to experts, the deadly terrorist attack that was carried out at Jordanian hotels in 2005 by al-Zarqawi's militants, killing 60 people and injuring over 100, infuriated Bin Laden. They believe, as does al-Zawahiri, that their Iraqi colleague was involved in the gratuitous

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<sup>14</sup><http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/05/07/bin-laden-documents-the-sometimes-competing-vision-of-al-qaedas-top-two/> (English).

<sup>15</sup><http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/the-short-violent-life-of-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/304983/> (English).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

killing of Sunnis and Shi'ites, and that this damaged Al-Qaeda's image. In addition to demonstrating al-Zarqawi's power, the attack testified to his increasing independence from Al-Qaeda.

Even though, in certain circles, it had previously been assumed that al-Zarqawi did not have the power to even compete with a "brand" as strong as Bin Laden's,<sup>17</sup> it is clear that recent events prove otherwise. It seems that al-Baghdadi operates more under the guidance of al-Zarqawi than he ever had under the guidance of Bin Laden, as indicated by his overt attack on the Shi'ite people (a "near enemy"), and his aspiration to independence.

Additional examples of Al-Qaeda's weakening control of its affiliates can be seen in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Somalia. Tension that erupted between the parties generally stemmed from strategic disagreements. The leadership of Al-Qaeda under Bin Laden opposed the harm of innocent Muslim civilians but tried to promote global jihad, at times at the expense of its branches' local interests.<sup>18</sup>

Rifts among "players" within the various Al-Qaeda affiliates, such as that faced by the Al-Nusra Front,<sup>19</sup> are not new. In the past, such rifts developed due to organizational disputes during periods of increased activity, as happened among members of the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus; between members of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and their Algerian colleague Mukhtar bil-Mukhtar; and within Al-Shabab Al-Mujahideen in Somalia.<sup>20</sup>

### **"From the Desk" of the Arab Press**

In the Arab press it was noted that the largest number of foreign fighters on Syrian soil comes from the Maghreb [North Africa]. In June 2013, the Lebanese television station Al-Manar reported on the fall of 6,113 foreign soldiers in preceding months – including scores of Algerians and Tunisians. Commentators suggest that jihadists from the Maghreb fought

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<sup>17</sup>[http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/Special/2013/06/24/Al-Qaida-leadership-rift-hints-at-future-trouble/UPI-89561372092354/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2013/06/24/Al-Qaida-leadership-rift-hints-at-future-trouble/UPI-89561372092354/);  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/the-short-violent-life-of-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/304983/> (both in English).

<sup>18</sup>[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=35831&tx#.Uc3ocjtkMXE](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35831&tx#.Uc3ocjtkMXE);  
[http://www.cas.umt.edu/phil/documents/HOW\\_AL\\_QAEDA\\_WORKS.pdf](http://www.cas.umt.edu/phil/documents/HOW_AL_QAEDA_WORKS.pdf);  
[http://sabahionline.com/en\\_GB/articles/hoa/articles/features/2012/05/08/feature-01](http://sabahionline.com/en_GB/articles/hoa/articles/features/2012/05/08/feature-01);  
<http://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Self-Inflicted-Wounds.pdf> (all in English).

<sup>19</sup><http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/17/us-syria-crisis-nusra-idUSBRE94G0FY20130517> (English).

<sup>20</sup> <http://old.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5619>; <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4fa79fe32.html>  
[http://al-shorfa.com/en\\_GB/articles/meji/features/2013/02/12/feature-01](http://al-shorfa.com/en_GB/articles/meji/features/2013/02/12/feature-01) (all in English).

alongside the Al-Nusra Front, reinforcing it to the point where it came to play an essential role in the civil war and develop hegemonic aspirations for a jihadist monopoly in Syria at the expense of other militant groups.

It has been claimed that the youth of the Maghreb prefer the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, to other militant groups. Tunisian militants are fighting alongside the Front due to their historical relationship with the terrorist network (i.e. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), and because the Front is suffering from internal and external disagreements about its impact, and is therefore perceived as needing support, due to its lack of consolidation. It was stressed that the crisis between the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham was actually a "conflict of influence, profits and bounty" (especially from the oilfields in northeastern Syria), over which each side is trying to exert control.<sup>21</sup>

The increasing involvement of North African fighters in the Syrian civil war is raising concern in the Arab regarding the damage these fighters may cause when they return home.<sup>22</sup> In addition, fear has been aroused that the war may spread to other countries in the region (as has happened in Lebanon),<sup>23</sup> and that it may spark a future regional war between Sunnis and Shi'ites.<sup>24</sup>

### **"From the Desk" of the Jihadist Press**

The crisis between the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham became public in April 2013. Since then, the jihadist discourse has revealed more and more details that reflect the tension between the movements. Supporters from the arena of global jihad, in general, and from Syria, in particular, are increasingly expressing their sympathy for one

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<sup>21</sup> [http://magharebia.com/ar/articles/awi/features/2013/06/20/feature-01?change\\_locale=true](http://magharebia.com/ar/articles/awi/features/2013/06/20/feature-01?change_locale=true);  
<http://jbcnews.net/article/17056-%D8%AC%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%A3%D9%85-%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82>  
(both in Arabic).

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.almustakbalpaper.net/news.php?id=18479>;  
[http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/features/2013/06/13/feature-01](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2013/06/13/feature-01);  
[http://magharebia.com/ar/articles/awi/features/2013/06/20/feature-01?change\\_locale=true](http://magharebia.com/ar/articles/awi/features/2013/06/20/feature-01?change_locale=true) (all in Arabic);

<sup>23</sup> <http://rt.com/news/beirut-blast-hezbollah-lebanon-835/> (English);

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=58234> (Arabic);

or the other of the two groups, by posting pictures<sup>25</sup> and videos<sup>26</sup> on the Internet. Others express hope that “the mujahideen will unite”.<sup>27</sup>

During the first half of August 2013, for example, visitors to the Hanein jihadist Web forum discussed that Abu Omar al-Shishani,<sup>28</sup> the leader of Kata’ib Al-Muhajirun wal-Ansar, a Salafi-jihadist organization operating in Syria, had sworn allegiance to al-Baghdadi.<sup>29</sup> Alongside the many expressions of support for al-Shishani’s pledge to al-Baghdadi,<sup>30</sup> one visitor to the Ana Al-Muslim Lil-Hiwar Al-Islami jihadist Web forum wished for al-Shishani to retract it.<sup>31</sup>

Even on the Hanein jihadist Web forum, which fundamentally identifies with AQI and most of whose visitors support the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham, one can discern tension among certain users as a result of the crisis. Even discussions regarding issues that have nothing to do with the matter often deteriorate into an argument between supporters of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham and supporters of the Al-Nusra Front.<sup>32</sup>

## Evaluation

The rift between the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham will affect relationships in the arena of jihad in Syria, in particular. In the short term, al-Zawahiri will be forced to cope with al-Baghdadi’s lack of discipline, and in the long term he will be forced to expel “players” from the ranks of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The May 23, 2013 letter attributed to him tells of his harsh and unprecedented interference in Al-Qaeda’s branches in Syria and

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.hanein.info/vb> (Arabic).

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-OmxAmiSZs> (Arabic).

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16ha8QpPmB0> (Arabic).

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.as-ansar.com/vb/> (Arabic).

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdkAJtqdA4> (Arabic).

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.inewsarabia.com/497/%D8%A5%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A.htm> (Arabic).

<sup>30</sup> <http://hanein.info/vb> (Arabic).

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.muslim.org/vb/showthread.php?517398-%D9%85%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%83%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%B3-%D8%A8%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA&p=3561006> (Arabic).

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.hanein.info/vb> (Arabic).

Iraq, in light of his demand that the appointment of their leaders, al-Golani and al-Baghdadi, respectively, be reviewed by the Shura Council within one year of their election. Nonetheless, it seems that al-Zawahiri has not succeeded so far in restraining his colleagues in Iraq, and in this important test case he has essentially failed.

These developments will influence the extent of global jihad's involvement in Syria, which is liable to deteriorate into clashes among jihadist movements.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Jun-25/221469-al-qaedas-syria-rift-may-lead-to-open-conflict-among-jihadists.ashx#axzz2XcDDWJHS> (English).