



ISIS' Threat Assessment to Israel

Threat Assessment in Light of ISIS' Spokesman's Call
to Foil the "Plan of the Century" and Attack Israel

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On January 27th, 2020, **al-Furqan** media outlet, owned by **ISIS**, posted a recorded speech by **al-Muhajir Abu Hamza al-Qurayshi**, the organization's newly appointed spokesman. The length of the recording was 37 minutes and it was titled "Allah Destroyed Them and the Infidels in the Same Manner". It seemed that the timing of the speech was carefully selected to be proximate to Pres. Trump's "Plan of the Century" that captured the headlines in the international and regional arenas.

The speech deals with the reshaping and presentation of the new operational policy for ISIS, while highlighting that ISIS will keep moving on the same trail the previous leadership has blazed however with a **new focus**. The spokesman announced that the organization has embarked on a new stage, distinguishing the new leader, sheikh **Abu Ibrahim al-Qurayshi**, who switches the organization from **a survival mode to an expansion mode**.



Al-Qurayshi's speech banner

This document will examine the main messages coming from that speech and the responses it received from ISIS supporters. Additionally, the document will present insights gleaned from that speech compared to previous speeches made by senior ISIS members. That said, a review of the organization's activity in the four months that have elapsed since the speech was posted no significant change in ISIS' modus operandi has been observed, not even vis a vis Israel and at this stage it is unclear whether the above is stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic or lack of operational capability.

Internal ISIS Messages

In his January 2020 speech, **al-Muhajir Abu Hamza al-Qurayshi**, the organization's newly appointed spokesman stressed that ISIS is at war on all fronts and the latter has been practicing a **defensive jihad** policy aimed at protecting Islam and Muslim community. Further, ISIS' new leader continued on the same path that al-Baghdadi took and declared a **new phase of jihad, focused on Israel**. It would seem that despite the announcements of its demise, ISIS keeps operating in Syria and Iraq and relies on clandestine cells, groups and terrorist networks consisting of thousands of activists, mainly in its former territories and the refugee camps in Syria and Iraq. It should be noted, the elimination of al-Baghdadi didn't stop the organization from trying to form centers of gravity outside Syrian and Iraq.

Al-Quaryshi **praised the organization's fighters who have pledged their allegiance to the new leader**, Abu Ibrahim al-Qurayshi, and includes in this group the media outlets and groups of ISIS supporters. He called upon more ISIS fighters to pledge their allegiance. On the heels of the above, al-Bataar media outlet that assists with ISIS' propaganda posted a video that reviewed ISIS' development under al-Baghdadi at the end of which incorporated a series of pledges of allegiance to al-Qurayshi **as a message of continuity and resolve to keep on the organization's path**.



Al-Bataar's clip banner

Within its efforts to **expand its membership and establish operational infrastructure in its secondary centers of gravity**, the spokesman called upon Muslims to emigrate to the nearest jihadi theater and join an ISIS training camp. Per him, the leadership's goal is to **continue the attacks on**

western targets and expand their scope: *“We order you to double the activity and increase the attacks. List the targets, make plans and mine the roads. Lay IEDs, position snipers and kill with silencers. Turn the infidels’ joy into funerals and ambush them everywhere”.*

The spokesman also addresses the **issue of prisoners**, which must be read within the context of the incarceration some 10,000 ISIS fighters (of which 2,000 or so are foreign fighters¹) in Syrian Democratic Forces prisons. The issue is not a new one and there have been attempts to break in and liberate them. For example, in 2012 ISIS activists broke into several prisons, including Abu Ghraib and liberated 500 prisoners. In its current speech the spokesman promised that the issue of the prisoners will be handles in due course and one must wait for it patiently.

Focusing the War on Israel

The spokesman stresses that ISIS’ new leader **has embarked on a new stage of jihad whose purpose was a war with Israel**, to repatriate what was stolen from Muslims and to sabotage “The Deal of the Century”. *“Today we embarked on a new stage in our struggle against you. the eyes of the caliphate’s soldiers everywhere are turned on Jerusalem. In the upcoming days, god willing, events will happen that will make you forget that horror² you have been exposed to in the times of our former leaders, Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi, Abu Amar al-Baghdadi and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. [...] the Muslims’ Caliph Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Quarayshi [...] decided that him and his mujahidin brothers in the other territories and the Muslims all over [would open] a new stage which is fighting the Jews and repatriating what they had stolen from the Muslims, which would be repatriated only through a*

¹ Miriam Berger, Here’s what we know about the ISIS prisons controlled by the Syrian Kurds. Washington Post, 14.10.2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/10/12/inside-isis-prisons-controlled-by-syrian-kurds/>

² i.e. horrified ISIS enemies

guiding book, a victorious sword, the conquest of Jerusalem and passing the banner to Muhammad Ibn Abdallah the Mehdi, Allah willing”³.

The spokesman states that the war will **focus on hitting Israeli settlements, population centers in Israel and Jewish targets across the world**. Jewish and Israeli targets outside Israel are relatively “soft” targets and easier to attack for global jihadi organizations. Among the above one can count the Jewish communities around the world, Israeli interests such as government officials and other state symbols (athletes, tourists). It should be noted, ISIS operative already perpetrated attacks against Jewish/Israeli targets such as the attack in the Jewish museum in Brussels in May 2014, the Qawashi brothers’ attack in Paris in January 2015 and others. Within this framework, an attack on designated unique apparatuses such as aviation, naval, cyber etc.⁴

To accomplish the above the spokesman called **ISIS fighters in Syria and Sinai as well as the Palestinians** (excluding Hamas whom he called “collaborators” and “Iran’s lap dogs” etc.) **to be the spearhead of this war**. The spokesman actually calls far and wide to join the soldiers of the caliphate to attack and kill Jews in Palestine and elsewhere “*we are calling you to join the soldiers of the caliphate, striving to remove the borders and the obstacles standing in their way to fight the Jews, who are determined – Allah willing – to defeat the armies and topple the thrones [of governments] formed by the crusaders [a derogatory term for the west] as a shield and protectors for the Israelites, and incite their brothers everywhere to attack the Jews and butcher them, inside Palestine or out, kill them where you find them*”. The spokesman adds that all weapons must be used, including **chemical weapons**.

³ Per Muslim tradition in the Suna, at the end of days a messiah will appear, and he will redeem all the Sunnis, fight all the enemies of Islam, especially the Jews. This messiah’s name is Muhammad Ibn Abdallah and according to the tradition he will be a descendant of the prophet Muhammad’s family, a direct descendant of Fatma, Muhammad’s daughter.

⁴ Dr. Eitan Azani, Col. (Res.) Joni Figel and Ms. Lorena Atiyas-Lvovsky, “ISIS’ Threat to Israel, the Challenge and the Ways to Contend With it - Threat Assessment - January 2016”; ICT, <https://www.ict.org.il/Article/1599/ISIS-threat-to-Israel#gsc.tab=0>

It should be noted, this is not the first time ISIS sets its sights on Israel. During the wave of terrorist knifing attacks that washed over Israel in 2015, there was an increase in the scope of the discourse that discussed Israel. Within this framework, ISIS posted many videos addressing the holy sites and called for the continued activity of “lone wolves”. In March 2015, ISIS posted a video containing an alleged admission by a Muslim named Muhammad Said Ismail who had presented himself as a resident of eastern Jerusalem and claimed he was working for the Mossad after been recruited by his Jewish neighbor. Per ISIS, it had a list of Israeli Arabs that were sent by the Mossad to Iraq and even posted some identifiers of these people. At the end of the above video, Ismail was seen executed by an ISIS child-soldier. In October 2015 another video was posted wherein an ISIS activist threatened Israel in Hebrew. The height of the activity was in December 2015, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared that “*Palestine is to be made a cemetery for its Jewish residents*”⁵. It should be noted, over the years, ISIS extension in Sinai posted various videos wherein its operatives threatened to hit Jews and al-Sisi’ security forces which have been accused of protecting Israel’s borders.

ISIS’ 2015 campaign against Israeli and Jewish targets didn’t pick up due to a new reality that stemmed from the international coalition’s success, which forced ISIS to focus on defending the caliphate and establish secondary centers of gravity outside Syria and Iraq. That led to the organization was not able to conduct more than sporadic activity against Israel (e.g. from the Sinai region) and recruit new fighters. Within this framework, tens of Israeli Arabs and Palestinians who have been influenced by ISIS were arrested. The first ISIS inspired attack was perpetrated in January 2016 in Tel Aviv by Nashat Muhammad Ali Milhem⁶. On that note, ISIS is not a trail blazer as far as announcement to perpetrate attacks against Israel. Al-Qaeda designated Israel as a target in 2005 when

⁵ 26.12.15. <http://www.cssn.tk/2015/12/5t.html>

⁶ Dr. Eitan Azani, Col. (Res.) Joni Figel and Mrs. Lorena Atiyas-Lvovsky, “ISIS’ Threat to Israel, the Challenge and the Ways to Contend With it - Threat Assessment - January 2016”; ICT, <https://www.ict.org.il/Article/1599/ISIS-threat-to-Israel#gsc.tab=0>

it published its seven stages program⁷. **The organizational decision to attack Israel has already been made by various terrorist organizations but its execution is dependent on the one hand on their operational capabilities and available opportunities and on the other hand on various delating factors as well as Israel's ability to thwart such attempts.**

Addressing the Regional Theater's State of Affairs

Regarding **Syria** the spokesman announced that the war was not over yet and things were likely to change once the U.S. will withdraw from Syria. Further, he stressed that ISIS held information on Kurdish collaborators who will have to answer for their actions when the day will come.

Per him, the war with **Iran and its allies in Iraq and the region** was not over but rather entered a new stage, in light of the Americans turning on the Shiite militias in Iraq. The spokesman mocked the Iranian response to the elimination of Qassim Soleimani and claimed that the only ones that were able to get the Americas to withdraw from Iraq were ISIS fighters.

Supporters' Responses on Social Media

The speech gained strong exposure on social media, inter alia by ISIS supporters, and prompted postings of photos and correspondence that threatened to attack Jews and Israeli targets. For example, a clip titled "Jews we are coming" that included a threat to forcibly liberate Jerusalem from the Jews was posted⁸.

⁷ *Al-Qaeda's Operational Strategies - The Attempt to Revive the Debate Surrounding the Seven Stages Plan*", International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) - JWMG Insights, July 12, 2009. Retrieved from: http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/0/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWMG_Al-Qaeda_Operational_Strategies.pdf

⁸ 30.1.20. <https://playtubescrpt.com/watch/cwEVGgqeXNSjf9a>



“Jews we are coming” clip banner

Quraysh media outlet, assisting with ISIS propoganda, posted a series of threats such as banners simulating chemical missiles raining on Israel and a photo of Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s Prime Minister, donning a gas mask⁹.



The part of al-Qurayshi’s speech that threatens to attack Jews was translated to Hebrew

⁹ Jan-Feb 2020. Telegram.



Banners posted by Quraysh media outlet simulating a chemical missiles attack on Israel

Further, ISIS supporters posted banners and photos on social media containing central messages from al-Qurayshi’s speech. For example, a banner titled “to the children of Jews” contained a declaration on the opening of a new stage in ISIS’ strategy that focuses on Jewish and Israeli targets globally.



Right to left: “To the children of Jews” banner; Al-Naba infographic addressing al-Qurayshi’s speech

Similarly, vol.209 of al-Naba magazine, posted on January 30th, 2020 opened with al-Qurayshi’s speech. Al-Taqwa media outlet also posted banners portraying ISIS fighters as the leaders of the struggle against Israel and the liberation of Jerusalem and al-Aqsa mosque¹⁰.



Al-Taqwa banners

ISIS’ Efforts to Preserve Continuity and Rejuvenation

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and ISIS’ spokesman elimination created a very complex scenario for ISIS which regardless of the above was already in a crisis mode in light of the fall of the caliphate. Therefore, the main leadership effort was directed towards continuity and immediate appointments to replace the fallen, expanding the pledge of allegiance and searching for creative courses of action. An analysis of correspondence within the leadership as of October 2019 bolsters the above.

For example, on October 31st, 2019 only days after the al-Baghdadi’s elimination on October 27th, an announcement that the ISIS Shura council has unanimously decided to appoint a new caliph. The announcement was delivered during the first speech of the new ISIS spokesman, Abu Hamza al-Qurayshi who replaced Abu Hassan al-Muhajir, himself eliminated a few hours prior to al-Baghdadi. The audio clip titled “and all who keep what they promised to Allah, will give him a great reward” is

¹⁰ Telegram, February 2020.

based on a verse from the Quran¹¹, is seven minutes long and as aforementioned, **the first public statement by the new official spokesman.**

The speech opened with a eulogy to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Hassan al-Muhajir alongside praises for their actions. In the speech the speaker called to avenge their deaths and threatened the U.S. Al-Qurayshi mentioned that the U.S. should not rejoice because ISIS was at the doorstep of Europe and central Africa and keeps expanding. Further, he called Muslims to pledge their allegiance to the new leader and addressed the issue of releasing ISIS members locked up in prisons. Al-Qurayshi also called the organization's various provinces' members to be patient, adhere to Islam and jihad, support their leader and fulfil al-Baghdadi's will¹².

In this context, the new leader was presented as a “prominent jihadist”, a veteran fighter, who had a track record of fighting the U.S. in addition, his nickname attests to familial connection to Muhammad's tribe, the Quraysh, which likely was an important factor in announcing him as the new caliph. Moreover, the multiple pledges of allegiance to the new leader point to his important stature within ISIS in as much as they point to the leadership's effort to stabilize the organization, solidify continuity and support for the new leader, despite the deaths of al-Baghdadi and al-Muhajir. It should be noted however that the new leader has not yet made a public statement.

The above ISIS conduct in 2019-2020 is no different than its demeanor at the beginning of the decade when al-Baghdadi took his office as its leader. Then too, continuity and formulating new courses of action were a leading pattern. They were shaped by the leader and passed on the organization via the spokesman or the leader himself. Then too, a public appearance or a clip of the leader very seldom saw light.

¹¹ "وَمَنْ أَوْفَىٰ بِمَا عَاهَدَ عَلَيْهُ اللَّهُ فَسَيُؤْتِيهِ" (Sura 8, verse 10).

¹² 31.10.19. <https://alshumukh.net/>; <https://pastethis.to/xw9G01g5VWQV0>

A comparison with previous public statements by senior ISIS members shows that **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**, who was first appointed as Islamic Iraq leader in **April-May 2010**, made his first public statement **only on July 2012** (Ramadan 1433) so a similar behavior pattern by Abu Ibrahim al-Qurayshi should not raise question marks or concerns among ISIS members. In the aforementioned speech, **al-Baghdadi presented ISIS' organizational strategy that stood on four legs**: (i) expansion to new territories through jihad; (ii) encouragement of Muslim emigration to jihadi arenas in Iraq; (iii) uncompromising war with the Shiite; (iv) maintaining unity of ranks among the activists.

A few months later, in November 2012, the then-spokesman, Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami, addressed that speech and announced the opening of a new stage of jihadi activity, aimed at returning to their regions and forcefully inherit them.

It should be noted, al-Adnani, made his first public speech on August 2011 and titled it “Islamic State Stays”. In the speech al-Adnani referred to the OBL elimination as an event that would not hinder jihad and criticized the foreign elements who meddle in Iraq to promote their own interests. The speech also referenced Israel as wishing to form a secular Kurdish state to serve as its ally and Iran as the one wishing to strengthen the Iraqi Shiite. Additionally, al-Adnani called the Sunni Iraqi tribes to resist the foreign involvement in Iraq, hit the Shiite and the occupation forces just like in the Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi era. He also promised to liberate the Muslim prisoners from Iraqi prisons while stressing this was a religious order. **It is evident that this was a central theme in ISIS' upper echelon's speeches, as was the case in the new spokesman speech in January 2020.**

Other than recorded speeches, **two video clips of al-Baghdadi** saw light during his tenure. The first, **on June 2014**, where he announced the formation of an Islamic caliphate under his leadership. It was a sermon given on a Ramadan Friday in the big mosque in Mosul, Iraq. Al-Baghdadi wore black, a sign of a state of war in Islam, and said there was a power struggle between the forces of truth and lies and Allah was on the side of the mujahidin. Within this framework he listed several enemies

among them Alawi, Jews, Crusaders, the rulers of Islamic states and others. He praised Iraqis who fought the Shiite and stressed that the U.S. will fail in its war in Iraq and Syria. After the announcement on the Islamic caliphate, the organization launched a magazine titled Dabiq that included, inter alia, messages on the Muslim victory over the infidels¹³.

Again, al-Adnani bolstered the leader's statements through an audio clip titled "This is Allah's Promise" where he praised the formation of the caliphate and stressed that this was a historic moment when the Islamic nation's honor had been restored while at the same time the idea of nation states forced on Muslims by the west has collapsed. Within this framework the organization's name was changed from The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham to The Islamic State which was meant to highlight the idea of elimination of borders¹⁴.

The second, and last, al-Baghdadi clip saw light in April 2019. In it he called ISIS supporters to avenge the blood of the dead in Baghouz, Syria, the last ISIS stronghold. Within this framework al Baghdadi praised the terror attacks in Sri Lanka and other regions and addressed several middle eastern events: the Israeli elections, the resignation of the president of Algeria, the deposition of the president of Sudan. Further, he acknowledged the pledge of allegiance made by supporters from Burkina Faso, Mali and other locations and ended the clip by presenting a leaflet with the various provinces¹⁵ of ISIS to show the latter's expansion.

Al-Adnani gave his last speech, titled "But [it was] so that Allah might accomplish a matter already destined - that those who perished [through disbelief] would perish upon evidence and those who lived [in faith] would live upon evidence"¹⁶ on May 2016 prior to his elimination. In it he addressed

¹³ Jihadi Forums Update, the first half of July 2014 (JWMG) <https://www.ict.org.il/Article/1410/JWMG-He-First-July#gsc.tab=0>

¹⁴ Jihadi Forums Update, the second half of June 2014 (JWMG) <https://www.ict.org.il/UserFiles/JEMG262014He.pdf>

¹⁵ Jihadi Forums Update, April 2019 (JWMG)

https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2470/%D7%A2%D7%93%D7%9B%D7%9F_%D7%A4%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%9D_%D7%92%D7%94%D7%90%D7%93%D7%99%D7%9D_%D7%90%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9C_2019#gsc.tab=0

¹⁶ Quran, Chapter 8 Verse 42

the state of affairs in Syria and stressed that the infidel forces partnered up in Syria to fight ISIS and its efforts to fly the flag of Allah. Per him, fighting against Islam and Muslims is not new. This was a trend in the U.S. war in Iraq 13 years prior after Jews managed to trick the U.S. government into a war in Iraq. A similar scenario plays out on Syria when the U.S. and its allies wage a war against ISIS, however this war is destined to fail and the U.S. would suffer a major defeat, much like the one it suffered in Iraq. In light of the above, al-Adnani called upon ISIS supporters in Europe and the U.S. to attack any target anywhere in the world with every means available even by “throwing rocks at the crusaders in their homestead”. He added that the blood of civilians in the west was allowed and they cannot be regarded as innocents, as there were religious rulings in Islam that allowed to spill such blood. Moreover, the western countries spill Muslim blood in Islamic territories therefore the civilian blood on western countries is allowed. On another issue he criticized the rebel factions in Syria, including the al-Nusra Front which he accused of heresy. Per him, the rebel factions collaborate with the U.S. and coalition forces against ISIS.

ISIS’ new spokesman from January 2020, some three months after Abu Ibrahim al-Qurayshi took office attests to **continuity** and determination to operate despite the defeats it suffered in recent years. The spokesman stressed that not only ISIS survived but it also expanded into additional jihadi theaters. Within this framework he **presented a policy that one of its focal points is a struggle against Israel**. Yet, he calls for continued activity in other theaters such as Iraq and encourages recruitment and pledges of allegiance to the new leader, as a manifestation of the **continuity and expansion theme**.

The timing of the speech, in proximity to the announcement of the “Deal of the Century”, is not random. That timing, in our opinion, was meant to position ISIS as a **leading global player**. Moreover, Israel’s position in the center of the discourse following the “Deal of the Century” was also a reason for ISIS to select it as a target.

Indeed, since COVID-19 broke out, it caught the headlines and word attention which led to a fading focus on Israel. However, Sec. Pompeo's recent visit to Israel in May 2020 rejuvenated the peace process in every aspect. **Therefore, it is possible that now, in light of the pandemic and the increase in ISIS activity in several provinces in Syria, Iraq and Africa, the organization will choose to cease the day and act against the west, israel included.**

ISIS' spokesman speech of January 2020 meshes with ISIS' strategy to **maintain a leadership continuity alongside uniqueness and relevance**. It is another link in a chain of events and speeches meant in our opinion **to preserve the organization's cohesion and activity**.

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