



October 16, 2013

Ayman al-Zawahiri, leader of Al-Qaeda, urges jihadist forces fighting the Assad regime in Syria to unite in a common struggle to establish an Islamic Caliphate.



Al-Qaeda leader Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri (Connectionivoirienne.net website, October 11, 2013)

Overview

1. On October 11, 2013, **Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri**, the leader of Al-Qaeda, issued a new audio message disseminated by the Islamist websites. He gave his evaluation of the recent events in the Middle East, focusing on Syria and Egypt. Regarding Syria, **he urged the Islamists fighting there to unite in a common struggle against the Syrian regime and to stop collaborating with secular forces.** In our assessment, he was referring to the dispute between the **Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria** (the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda in Iraq) and the **Al-Nusra Front** (*Jabhat al-Nusra*, the branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria directly subordinate to Ayman al-Zawahiri). **Thereby he urged the two rival organizations to end their dispute and unite** (For the dispute between them and its roots, see the Appendix).

2. Al-Zawahiri stated that all Muslims had to unite to overthrow the Syrian regime and **establish a jihadist Islamic country in Syria**. That, he said, would open the way to the **restoration of the Islamic Caliphate and the "liberation of Jerusalem."** He said, among other things, the following:

1) "I urge the brothers, the jihad fighters in blessed Syria [Al-Sham], to unite and come together and agree that soon, in Greater Syria [Al-Sham], if Allah so wishes, **an Islamic state will arise that will be governed by the Sharia** [Islamic religious law]."

2) "Lions of Al-Sham [Syria], unite for the sake of this noble cause, **rise above the divisions between the various organizations and splintered groups and with mutual agreement, good will and desire in your souls, establish a strong Islamic state.**"

3) "Our brothers in Syria of the jihad and the *ribat* [frontier],¹ keep yourselves from entering into an agreement with those [factions which] **are secular, with those who want to be like the Americans and atheists at the expense of the sovereignty of the Sharia and the laws of Islam.**"

3. On the ground, reports continue of acts of violence and cruelty perpetrated by both organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda. On October 11, 2013, a Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued a report **accusing the Islamist rebels in Syria**, among them operatives of the **Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, of war crimes**. According to the report, some of the rebel organizations fighting in the rural areas around Latakia executed innocent civilians and carried out war crimes and crimes against humanity targeting Alawite women, children and the aged. The report also stated that in an attack occurring on August 4, 2013, **at least 190 civilians were killed, 67 of them killed execution-style**. In addition, more than 200 civilians were taken hostage (HRW website, October 11, 2013).

Assessment

4. There has been an ongoing dispute between the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria. It came to a head in June 2013 when Ayman al-Zawahiri recognized the Al-Nusra Front as an independent branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria, not subordinate to the Iraqi branch. **His ruling, however, did not settle the**

¹ The term *ribat* refers to the outposts of Islam in the frontier where Muslims are liable to fight against their enemies.

dispute, but rather worsened it and widened the split between the sides. Thus the split was translated into the establishment of two organizations with separate military, logistic and propaganda systems. It also led to several violent clashes between the two.

5. In our assessment, it is doubtful whether al-Zawahiri's open appeal will in fact mend the rift between the two branches of Al-Qaeda. However, it may, at least in the short run, lessen the friction and competition between them and **lead to greater cooperation in fighting their common enemy, the Syrian regime.** On the other hand, al-Zawahiri's warning against collaboration with secular and pro-American organizations **may deepen the fundamental hostility between the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria on the one hand, and the Free Syrian Army, the network representing most of the rebel groups in Syria on the other.**

Appendix

The roots of the split between the jihadist organizations fighting in Syria²

1. **The Iraqi and Syrian branches of Al-Qaeda in Syria are divided, operating as competing and sometimes hostile organizations.** The Al-Nusra Front was established in Syria by Al-Qaeda's Iraqi branch, which ran it. Initially its leader, **Abu Muhammad al-Julani**, apparently took orders from the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria leader Abu **Bakr al-Baghdadi**, who in effect controlled the Al-Nusra Front. Later on, apparently because of disputes between the leaders of the organizations, on April 9, 2013, **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi** issued an audiotape announcing the unification of the organizations in Iraq and Syria into the **Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (Al-Sham)** (YouTube.com).

2. The following day, April 10, 2013, **Abu Muhammad al-Julani**, the leader of Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, swore allegiance to Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Zawahiri, who was forced to take a stand in the power struggle between the two branches, **on June 10, 2013, announced the dissolution of the union between the Al-Nusra Front and Al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq.** In a letter sent to Al-Nusra Front operatives in Syria, al-Zawahiri said that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had been in error when he announced the union "without our approval, without consulted with us and without informing us." Accordingly, al-Zawahiri called on the two branches to cooperate with each other "and stop verbally or physically attacking each other" (Annahar, June 10, 2013, quoting a letter obtained by Al-Jazeera TV from "reliable sources in Syria).

3. That signaled al-Zawahiri's recognition of the Al-Nusra Front as Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria and not subordinate to the Iraqi branch, which should have ended the dispute. However, **instead of ending it, his declaration exacerbated the disputes** between the supporters of Al-Julani and those of Al-Baghdadi, causing them to drift further apart and weakening them both (at least temporarily). The disputes were also a challenge to Al-Zawahiri's command, because the leadership of the Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq commanded by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi publicly refused to obey Al-Zawahiri's orders. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi rejected Al-Zawahiri's ruling, questioned its authenticity and

² For further information see the September 17, 2013 bulletin "[The Al-Nusra Front \(Jabhat al-Nusra\) is an Al-Qaeda Salafist-jihadi network, prominent in the rebel organizations in Syria. It seeks to overthrow the Assad regime and establish an Islamic Caliphate in Greater Syria, a center for regional and international terrorism and subversion.](#)"

insisted that the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria should continue to exist as an autonomous political entity reflecting common efforts of jihad in Iraq and Syria.³

4. Ayman al-Zawahiri was again challenged by a statement made by **Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami**, the official spokesman of the Islamic State in Iraq. On June 19, 2013, al-Shami posted a video on YouTube expressing his annoyance with al-Zawahiri's decision to dissolve the union between the two Al-Qaeda branches, saying that **the Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq was determined to continue operating in Syria at the side of the Al-Nusra Front**. He added that the split between jihad fighters in Syria resulting from al-Zawahiri's remarks had harmed the unity and morale of the jihad fighters, some of whom had returned to Iraq, or stayed at home to avoid a civil war or joined other rebel groups. For the time being, however, it appears that the initial shock has passed and both Al-Qaeda branches have entrenched themselves as independent organizations in the Syrian theatre of operations.

5. **Abu Muhammad al-Adnani** relied on Islamist ideology to explain the refusal of the Iraqi Al-Qaeda branch to follow Al-Zawahiri's orders. He said that Islam did not recognize the artificial borders determined by the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916). Therefore, dividing the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria into two organizations, one Iraqi and the other Syrian, "contradicts our view and our faith." Al-Adnani concluded by saying that "no one will prevent us from helping our brothers in Syria, fighting the Nusayris [i.e., Alawites], and waging jihad; no one will prevent us from staying in Syria. The lands of Syria and Iraq will remain one arena, one front with no boundaries to separate them" (YouTube, June 19, 2013).

³ See Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi's article for Syria Comment (July 13, 2013), "Where does Jabhat al-Nusra end and the Islamic State of Iran and ash-Sham begin?" Also see MEMRI Report No. 983, June 18, 2013, "Jabhat al-Nusra and Al-Qaeda in Iraq squabble over leadership of jihad in Syria."