The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center
at the Israeli Intelligence & Heritage Commemoration Center

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The targeted killing of Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, ISIS's number 2 leader

Analysis and implications

Abu Mohammad Al-Adnani, considered ISIS's number 2 leader, commemorated in an article in ISIS's new organ, Rumiyah (i.e., Rome, the capital of Christianity)

Overview

1. On August 30, 2016, the US Department of Defense announced the **killing of Abu Mohammad Al-Adnani** in an airstrike carried out by the US-led coalition **near the town of Al-Bab, north of Aleppo**. According to the announcement, Al-Adnani was one of the central figures **in planning ISIS's attacks abroad**, in addition to being its **spokesman**. As part of his activity in planning ISIS's attacks abroad, he was responsible for coordinating the movements of ISIS operatives and directly advocated carrying out attacks against civilians and military personnel from different countries. He was also responsible for recruiting ISIS operatives (US Department of Defense website, August 30, 2016).

2. **The killing of Abu Mohammad al-Adnani represents another blow to ISIS**, since he was considered its number 2 leader and the figure closest to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Al-Adnani fought under Al-Baghdadi's command against the US

Army in Iraq before the establishment of ISIS). After the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate (2014), he enjoyed the status of a senior leader and held various positions whose nature was **military-operational** (terrorist attacks abroad), **political** (Al-Adnani was the one who announced the establishment of the Caliphate in June 2014), and **propagandist** (he was known for his calls on Muslims in the West to kill civilians in their home countries). Following Al-Adnani's calls on Muslims, **ISIS-inspired attacks** were carried out in the West (see Appendix C).

3. During the past year, there has been an increase in the effectiveness of **targeted killings of senior figures in ISIS**, mainly by the United States and the coalition countries. These targeted killings, and battles on the ground, **killed ISIS commanders at all levels, from top-ranking commanders to field commanders.** A prominent military commander who died in a US airstrike in Iraq was so-called **war minister Abu Omar al-Shishani (i.e., the Chechen)**[1]. In effect, the killing of Abu Mohammad al-Adnani and Abu Omar the Chechen **symbolize the elimination of ISIS's senior command chain, which operated under the leadership of Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and played a significant role in ISIS's day-to-day activity.** The killing has created a **vacuum that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is now trying to fill**[2].

[1] **Abu Omar the Chechen** was a Chechen jihadi operative from Georgia, in the former Soviet Union. Until the end of 2013, he was the head of an elite military unit called the Army of Emigrants, which was affiliated with the Al-Nusra Front. In early 2014, he defected to the ranks of ISIS and was appointed as its commander in northern Syria. He later **served as head of the military council of the Islamic State. American sources called him ISIS's war minister.** On July 13, 2016, ISIS's Aamaq News Agecy published an official announcement of the death of Omar the Chechen. According to the announcement, he was killed in battle around the city of Mosul (Aamaq, July 13, 2016). According to a previous announcement by the US Army from early March 2016, Omar the Chechen was killed in an airstrike on the city of Shadadi, south of Al-Hasakah, which had fallen into the hands of the Kurdish forces. According to the version of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), Omar the Chechen survived the airstrike but was seriously injured and taken to hospital in Al-Raqqah (SOHR; Al-Arabiya, March 13, 2016).

[2] **Ghul Mohammad Halimov**, a senior military operative from Tajikistan, was recently appointed as War Minister, succeeding Abu Omar the Chechen. At this stage, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani's successor has not yet been appointed.

Abu Mohammad al-Adnani (in the middle, with his face blurred) alongside Omar the Chechen (on the left). The two men appear in the video released by ISIS when the establishment of the Caliphate was announced (YouTube, June 29, 2014)

4. **At this point, the identity of Abu Mohammad al-Adnani's successor is unclear.** However, it is doubtful whether his successor will enjoy the close proximity to ISIS's leader and the many authorities wielded by Al-Adnani. In the ITIC's assessment, these powers might be divided among various commanders from various disciplines (for example, the appointment of different people to hold positions at the operational-terrorist level and at the propaganda level). Due to the sensitive nature of the positions held by Al-Adnani, it is likely that the decision on this matter will be made by ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi[3].

5. The killing of Abu Mohammad al-Adnani **is the latest in a number of systematic attacks against ISIS operatives in Syria and Lebanon** – from top-ranking commanders to commanders in the field. To this we can add the **continuing territorial "shrinkage" of ISIS in Syria, Iraq and Libya** (ISIS is about to lose control of its territorial area of control in Sirte). However, so far these blows **have not weakened ISIS's guerrilla and terrorist capabilities and, in the ITIC's assessment, have only increased the motivation of ISIS and its supporters to carry out terrorist attacks.** In the ITIC's assessment, **ISIS and its supporters will try to carry out revenge attacks for the killing of Al-Adnani and the recent blows that ISIS has suffered, not only in its core countries but also abroad, especially in the West and Turkey.**

[3] Arab media have published a few names of "candidates" for succeeding Al-Adnani. In the ITIC's assessment, these names should be treated with skepticism.

6. Following are a number of appendices:

A. **Appendix A:** ISIS's comments on the killing of Abu Mohammad al-Adnani

B. **Appendix B:** Biographical information about Abu Mohammad al-Adnani

C. **Appendix C:** Abu Mohammad al-Adnani's calls on Muslims in the West to carry out attacks

Appendix A

ISIS's comments on the killing of Abu Mohammad al-Adnani

1. On August 30, 2016, ISIS's media foundation Aamaq announced that **Sheikh Abu Mohammad al-Adnani had been killed while fighting in the Aleppo area**. ISIS's Aleppo Province issued a more detailed formal announcement that included an obituary. According to the announcement, Al-Adnani was killed **"while examining the [state of the] military operations in the Aleppo Province."** The announcement included a threat against the "infidels" and "Crusaders" (i.e., Christians) that the killing of Al-Adnani would **instigate ISIS's operatives to take revenge and attack them and pursue the path of jihad**. The announcement also stated that the new generation born in the Islamic State would not agree to its humiliation, and that the **blood of ISIS's senior officials would only make this generation adhere even more strongly to the path of jihad** (Haqq, August 30, 2016).

2. The death of Abu Mohammad al-Adnani and **the calls for revenge for his death** received considerable attention in ISIS's media. An article published **in the weekly Al-Naba** noted the circumstances of his death. An article titled "Rise up and die for what your brothers died for" was also published. The article encourages **Muslims to fight against the so-called infidels**. It ends by stating that **"the soldiers of Abu Mohammad al-Adnani" will cause great suffering to their enemies.**

Right: Al-Adnani's photo on the cover of ISIS's weekly magazine Al-Naba, with an inscription below, reading "Rise up and die for what your brothers died for." Left: ISIS's announcement of the death of Al-Adnani (Haqq, August 31, 2016)

3. Part of the first issue of ISIS's new organ, **Rumiyah**[4], which came out recently, is dedicated to Abu Mohammad al-Adnani. **On the cover of Rumiyah there is a photo of Al-Adnani, above a call on the Moslems: "Rise up and die for what your brothers died for."**

The cover of ISIS's new magazine, Rumiyah, featuring Abu Mohammad al-Adnani

4. The ISIS-affiliated **Al-Nusra al-Maqdisiyya media foundation** released a video documenting a group of **jihadi operatives from the Gaza Strip** praising Abu Mohammad al-Adnani. The video also includes a speech by Abu Mohammad al-Adnani. The video **calls on supporters of the Islamic State around the world to expand the fight against so-called infidels**. This war, according to ISIS, will end with "**the breaking of the cross and the victory of Islam**" (YouTube, September 7, 2016).

[4] **Rumiyah** is a new magazine published by ISIS's Al-Hayat media foundation. The magazine is intended for various target audiences abroad and is published in English, German, French, Turkish and Indonesian. It is apparently a replacement for the organ Dabiq. Rumiyah is the Arabic name for Rome, which is perceived as the capital of Christianity.

Appendix B

Biographical information about Abu Mohammad al-Adnani

Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, ISIS's number 2 leader (Al-Bayan News, January 7, 2016)

1. **Taha Subhi Falaha**, aka **Abu Mohammad al-Adnani al-Shami**, was born in 1977 in the city of Binnish, located about 7 km northeast of the city of Idlib in northwestern Syria. He is said to have enjoyed spending time in mosques as a child. He used to read many books, including books on philosophy. He is also said to have learned the entire Quran by heart in less than a year (Al-Jazeera, August 30, 2016). Abu Mohammad al-Adnani wrote several books on Islamic law, jihad, and the Quran.

2. **In the year 2000, Al-Adnani commenced his jihadi activity, pledging allegiance to Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, Al-Qaeda's leader in Iraq.** Al-Adnani was interrogated by the Syrian state security apparatus and was imprisoned in Syria three times for Da'wa and jihadi activity. After the US Army invaded Iraq, Al-Adnani's connection with Al-Zarqawi became stronger.

3. Al-Adnani was arrested by the US forces in Iraq's Al-Anbar Province and **was imprisoned from 2005 to 2010**. **During his stay in prison, he met Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who would later become the leader of ISIS.** According to a report attributed to US intelligence, when Al-Adnani was arrested on May 31, 2005, he was imprisoned in the Camp Bucca prison in Iraq's Al-Anbar Province, which is intended for radical Islamic detainees. However, Al-Adnani managed to deceive the coalition

forces by using an alias (Yasser Khalaf Hussein Nazal al-Rawi). Since his captors were not aware of Al-Adnani's importance, they released him from prison in 2010 (Al-Jazeera, August 30, 2016).

4. After his release, Al-Adnani returned to Syria. With the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, he joined the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, fighting against the Syrian regime under the command of Al-Qaeda leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani. After the rift between ISIS and Al-Qaeda's leadership, **Al-Adnani joined forces with Al-Baghdadi and became a key figure in ISIS.** In May 2014, Al-Adnani published an audiotape titled "Al-Qaeda leader's apology," in which he claims that ISIS in Iraq is not an official arm of Al-Qaeda. Abu Mohammad al-Adnani was the man who announced the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate on June 29, 2014.

5. Abu Mohammad al-Adnani was **the number 2 leader, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's right-hand man.** Besides handling media and propaganda, Al-Adnani also dealt with operational issues: the US Department of Defense called him the **principal architect of ISIS's external operations, who was involved in planning attacks in the West and elsewhere outside Syria and Iraq.** According to the Department of Defense, **he coordinated the movement of operatives and directly encouraged acts of terrorism by "lone wolves" against civilians and military personnel.** Al-Adnani was also involved in recruiting new ISIS operatives (US Department of Defense website, August 30, 2016). According to a report attributed to US intelligence, the attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015 (the attack at the Bataclan Theater and other targets) and the attacks carried out by two suicide bombers the day before in the Shiite stronghold in Bourj al-Barajneh in southern Beirut, **were carried out on Al-Adnani's instructions** (Al-Jazeera, August 30, 2016).

6. In August 2014, **the US added Abu Mohammad al-Adnani to its list of global terrorist operatives** (US Department of State, August 18, 2014). Consequently, Al-Adnani was under US intelligence surveillance. On May 5, 2015, **the US Department of State announced a USD 5 million reward for anyone providing information leading to his capture.** There were several attempts to kill him from the air, until his death in a coalition airstrike in the area of Aleppo.

Rewards that the US promised for the capture of ISIS leaders, including Abu Mohammad al-Adnani (in the middle of the third photo from the left) (US Department of State website, May 5, 2016)

Appendix C

Abu Mohammad al-Adnani's calls on Muslims in the West to carry out attacks

Al-Adnani, speaking in German and calling on Muslims to kill the "infidels" – the French, the Americans, and their allies – by every possible means. On the left there is a photo of ISIS spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani (Akhbar Dawlat al-Khilafah, April 16, 2016)

1. Abu Mohammad al-Adnani **was very active in the area of public relations.** He was the one who declared the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate, and **was later behind the dissemination of ISIS's messages on audiotapes, videos and posters**. He also ran **threat campaigns against many countries around the world, especially Western countries**, calling on Muslims to carry out attacks against the citizens of their home countries. Here are some examples:

A. **On February 14, 2015**, ISIS released an audiotape of Al-Adnani threatening that ISIS would **carry out attacks in France, Belgium, Canada and Australia.** Al-Adnani mentions the terrorist attacks that had already been carried out in these countries, and threatens that these countries would continue to live in fear and a sense of insecurity (YouTube, February 14, 2015).

B. **On March 13, 2015**, the forum of the Al-Furqan Media Foundation, ISIS's principal media entity, published a speech by Abu Mohammad al-Adnani. In his speech, Al-Adnani praises the stability of the Islamic Caliphate and downplays the significance of the achievements of the coalition fighting against ISIS. Al-Adnani addresses the Jews and Christians ("the Crusaders") and says that they have two options: the first and preferred option is **to join Islam**, and the

second is to **surrender to ISIS**, withdraw their armies from the Arabian Peninsula and from Jerusalem and the rest of the lands of Islam, and pay a poll tax to ISIS (ISIS-affiliated forum, March 13, 2015).

C. **On April 16, 2016,** Al-Adnani called on every devout Muslim to **"kill the infidels: the Americans, the French and their allies."** He said that those who couldn't do so with an IED or by shooting should act in other ways, such as **throwing stones, slitting throats, running over people, and burning homes and businesses** (Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, April 16, 2016).

D. **On May 21, 2016**, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani launched a new threat campaign (in several languages, including English, French and German). **He called on supporters of the Islamic Caliphate in Europe and America to attack the Crusaders [i.e., Christians] and kill them, stressing that there is no need to shirk from harming civilians,** because in the lands of the Crusaders there are no innocents: "Know that in the land of the Crusaders […] there is no immunity to blood, and there is no such thing as innocent […] Know that your harming so-called civilians is more desirable and beneficial to us because it hurts them more."

Abu Mohammad al-Adnani's calls on Muslims in the West to carry out attacks did not fall on deaf ears. **These calls had an effect on the perpetrators of ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks in France, Germany and other Western countries[5].**

[5] For further information about ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from August 9, 2016: "Analysis of ISIS-Inspired Terrorist Attacks in Western Countries."