



April 30, 2017

Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri calls on his followers in al-Sham (greater Syria) to abandon the concept of territorial control and concentrate on guerilla warfare, joined by other Muslims around the globe



Picture accompanying the recording of a speech by al-Qaeda leader Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri (YouTube, April 23, 2017).

Overview

1. On April 23, 2017, a speech recorded by al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was issued. It was entitled "**Al-Sham [greater Syria] will not surrender [to anyone] but Allah.**" It was produced by al-Sahab (al-Qaeda's "Foundation for Islamic Media Publication") and uploaded to YouTube. In the speech Ayman al-Zawahiri presented his worldview, addressed his followers in Syria and **formulated the principles and strategy for their continued fighting.**
2. In ITIC assessment, the background to the speech included **the growing difficulties faced by the jihadist organizations in Syria and Iraq;** the campaign to liberate Mosul from ISIS, which is approaching its final stages; the preparations for the attack on ISIS's Syrian stronghold in al-Raqqa; the loss of Aleppo and the pushing of the al-Qaeda-affiliated Fateh al-Sham Front and other rebel organizations into the area in and around Idlib. All that created a genuine need to learn from experience, formulate a strategy for the future and raise the fighters' morale.

3. **Ayman al-Zawahiri's strategy centers around operative suggestions/instructions**, including the following: **lessons have to be learned** from previous experience to improve future fighting capabilities; **the concept of territorial control [the ISIS concept] has to be abandoned**, and the problem in al-Sham should not be viewed as a national problem; **the strategy of guerilla warfare, which is the weapon on the weak, should be adhered to**; the campaign in al-Sham should not be regarded as local but rather **global, part of the comprehensive struggle Muslims are waging against the West** and their other enemies; **collaboration among the Muslims in al-Sham should be increased**; **Muslims all over the world should participate in the jihad in al-Sham through deploying operatives and sending money**, insofar as the Muslim nation is able.

4. Ayman al-Zawahiri did not specifically name **the Fateh al-Sham Front** (formerly al-Nusra Front, the branch of al-Qaeda in Syria). That was because **he wanted to blur the connections between al-Qaeda and the Fateh al-Sham Front** and their common ideology, to obviate the Front's difficulties in collaborating with other radical Islamic organizations (**within the headquarters for the liberation of al-Sham**¹). ISIS and the Islamic State were not specifically named, apparently not to worsen the rift between them and al-Qaeda, and to stress the call for unity against common enemies. **Thus Ayman al-Zawahiri appealed to "our followers in al-Sham" and to the Islamic nation as a whole.**

5. Ayman al-Zawahiri's strategy, at whose core is abandoning the concept of territorial control and adhering to guerilla warfare tactics, is **particularly relevant for ISIS**. The strategy challenges the establishment of the Islamic State/Caliphate established by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014, to which **Ayman al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda objected from the outset**. Moreover, it is entirely possible that the realization that **it is difficult to defend territory and that it would be better to return to the familiar tactics of guerilla warfare has begun to become apparent to ISIS's leadership**, in view of the imminent possibility that Mosul will fall (which was mentioned in the video published by ISIS's Nineveh Province.)²

¹ See the August 5, 2016 bulletin, "The establishment of the Fateh al-Sham Front in place of the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria: reasons and implications."

² On March 18, 2017, the Islamic State's Nineveh Province issued a video entitled "Your hand is uppermost." It presents ISIS's military capabilities and the moral superiority of its fighters (the video was published by Haq, ISIS's news agency, and uploaded to YouTube). It features a recording of a speech made by **Abu Muhammad al-Adnani**, the ISIS spokesman and one of its senior figures. In January 2012 (two years before the declaration of the Islamic State, when ISIS still engaged in guerilla warfare) he said **"We never fight for the sake of [control over any land], we fight for the restoration of the Caliphate**

Main Points of Ayman al-Zawahiri's Speech

6. The following were the main points of Ayman al-Zawahiri's speech:

a. **Al-Qaeda cannot support Muslims all over the world, especially its followers in al-Sham, because it is fighting the "Crusader enemy" [i.e., the Western countries] on other fronts:** "I want to remind our followers in al-Sham, your wounds and pain are the most painful wounds and pain of the entire [Islamic] nation...We hope to compensate you with our souls, **but what distracts us is the fact that we are toying with the Crusader enemy on a different front.**"

b. **The war in al-Sham is part of a comprehensive campaign against Islam:** "[The Muslims in al-Sham and especially followers of al-Qaeda] should know that they are a target [for their enemies] because [the Muslims] want Islam to rule the land." He added "The coalition of Satans [the American-led international coalition] does not accept [the control of Islam over al-Sham] and is doing its utmost to turn the tide of Islam."

c. **The followers of al-Qaeda in al-Sham must wage a long-term struggle against various enemies, not break down and continue waging jihad:** followers in al-Sham must stand firm and prepare themselves for a long war against the Crusaders and their allies [i.e., the West], the Shi'ites and the Alawites. Ayman al-Zawahiri also called on his followers in al-Sham **to be patient and not surrender**, because it was better for them to live with honor than humiliation.

d. **The struggle in al-Sham has to be global, and Muslims in al-Sham have to collaborate with Muslims around the world. It should not be a local national struggle separate from Islam:** Ayman al-Zawahiri called for the unification and bringing together of hearts of **Muslims in al-Sham³ and around the globe**, against what he called the "Crusade" against Muslims being fought everywhere. He called on his followers in al-Sham **to be wary of traitors who suggest that they wage a national Syrian struggle divorced from Islam.**

and the imposition of the laws of Allah. We fight to control the entire planet, using the laws of Allah" (Muslim.org, January 2012).

³ **The translation of the principle into practice** may be an effort of the headquarters for the liberation of al-Sham **to increase its cooperation with other Islamist rebel organizations.** That was directed especially at **Ahrar al-Sham**, a coalition of Islamic organizations campaigning to establish an Islamic state in Syria governed by Sharia law.

Such a struggle, he claimed, would lead to reconciliation with the worst criminals [that is, Bashar Assad's regime].

7. Once he had established the principles for continuing the fighting, **Ayman al-Zawahiri made three suggestions/instructions to his followers in al-Sham.**

a. **Lessons have to be learned to improve fighting in the future:** Learning those lessons will advance victory. Ayman al-Zawahiri's followers in Syria should be critical of the military operations they carry out to be able to correct their mistakes, following the example of the Prophet Muhammad.

b. **The concept of territorial control should be abandoned and exchanged for the strategy of guerilla warfare:** Fighters should focus on guerilla activities and on exhausting the enemy. According to Ayman al-Zawahiri, such warfare has always been the weapon of the weak against the "arrogant." The fighters should not concentrate on the control of territory but rather on operations to destroy the enemy's morale and plunge him into despair. **That can be done by repeated blows that will cause him many casualties.**⁴

c. **Al-Sham should not be regarded as a local problem but rather as a problem for the entire Muslim nation:** Enemies are trying to turn the problem in al-Sham into a national problem. That will turn it into a local problem of towns, cities and neighborhoods, shrinking the problem and eventually making it disappear. **Ayman al-Zawahiri called on the entire Islamic nation to join the jihad in al-Sham by sending its sons, money, resources and capabilities.**⁵

⁴ This suggestion was aimed primarily at ISIS, whose Islamic State concept, based on territorial control, was significantly shaken. However, it is also possible al-Zawahiri was also outlining strategy for his own followers in the Idlib enclave (the Fateh al-Sham Front, which collaborates with other rebel organizations), who face increasing pressure from the Syrian regime and its allies.

⁵ Ayman al-Zawahiri sent an open call to jihadists all over the globe to continue going to Syria and Iraq to aid al-Qaeda supporters. His call is **divorced from reality**, because in effect the ability of foreign jihadist fighters to reach Syria and Iraq is getting weaker. There are several reasons: ISIS has been driven out of its strongholds west of the Euphrates; the Turkish army and rebel organizations operating under its aegis have established themselves along the Syrian-Turkish border and increased their surveillance and inspection. In addition the preventive efforts of the Western intelligence services have become more effective.