



Split among Al-Qaeda's supporters in Syria, in light of severe differences of opinion regarding the nature of the ties with Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri

March 8, 2018

Overview

- ▶ At the end of February 2018, six local groups of jihadists operating in northern Syria announced **their withdrawal from the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham** and the establishment of a new organization called the **Guardians of the Religion Organization**. The new organization is headed by **Abu al-Humam al-Shami**, a veteran Al-Qaeda senior operative who fought with Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan and was sent to **Iraq** where he joined forces with **Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi** (the founding father of ISIS). Prominent among the leadership of the new organization is a **group of Jordanian Al-Qaeda operatives** who oppose the independent line of **Abu Mohammad al-Julani**, leader of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (formerly the Al-Nusra Front).
- ▶ In the background of the (additional) split in the ranks of Al-Qaeda supporters in Syria is a **fierce dispute** between the leadership of Al-Qaeda and its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, on the one hand, and **Abu Mohammad al-Julani**, leader of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, on the other. The dispute focuses on the **question of the nature of the connection between Al-Qaeda and its branch in Syria**: is the Al-Qaeda branch allowed to conduct **its own independent "Syrian" policy**, which adapts itself to the severe constraints imposed on it, **or is it subject to the instructions of Ayman al-Zawahiri**, whose perception of the situation in Syria (from afar) and set of considerations regarding the organization's conduct in Syria are **completely different**¹.
- ▶ This dispute reached its climax on November 28, 2017, when Al-Zawahiri strongly attacked the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and its leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani. Al-Zawahiri accused them of breaking away from the Al-Nusra Front's pledge of allegiance to Al-Qaeda and persecuting the supporters of Al-Qaeda in Syria. The severe attack came after

¹ An up-to-date example of this difference can be found in the call by the Guardians of the Religion Organization (which is loyal to Al-Zawahiri) to rush to the aid of the jihadists in eastern Al-Ghouta. This indicates a lack of understanding of the reality in Syria, since it is doubtful whether an attempt to transfer forces from the region of Idlib to eastern Al-Ghouta could have benefited the jihadists in Al-Ghouta. However, it would have greatly weakened the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the area of Idlib, its significant stronghold in Syria.

a **series of arrests carried out by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham among dozens of operatives affiliated with Al-Qaeda** who opposed Abu Mohammad al-Julani's independent line². The detainees included Abu Humam al-Shami (head of the Guardians of the Religion Organization, which has now seceded from the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham) and a number of senior operatives who hold senior positions in the new organization, **many of whom are Jordanian, as stated.**

The establishment of the Guardians of the Religion Organization is another step **in the long series of splits in Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria and Iraq (see Appendix)**. These splits, and the personal rivalries that accompany them, **greatly weaken Al-Qaeda's supporters in Syria**. In the ITIC's assessment, it is highly doubtful that the newly established organization could be turned into an effective force and, at the same time, its establishment **weakens the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham**. The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham **now faces mounting pressure**, both internal and external, **which weakens its ability to stand up to the Syrian regime once it takes over eastern Al-Ghouta and free to deal with the Idlib area.**

The establishment of the Guardians of the Religion Organization

► At the end of February 2018, **six jihadi local groups of Al-Qaeda operatives in northern Syria announced their withdrawal from the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham** and the establishment of a new jihadi organization called the **Guardians of the Religion Organization** (in Arabic: Tanzim Hurras Al-Din). The six jihadi groups that pledged allegiance to the new organization on March 4, 2018, are: **Jaysh Al-Malahem** (Army of the Tales of Heroism³), **Jaysh Al-Sahel** (The Coastal Army), **Jaysh Al-Badiyah** (The Desert Army), **Saraya Kabul** (The Kabul Companies), **Jund al-Sharia** (The Sharia Army), and **Jund al-Aqsa** (The Al-Aqsa Army) (Enab Baladi, Al-Alam, February 28, 2018).

² For details see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from December 6, 2017: "Fierce dispute between the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and Al-Qaeda."

³The word "*malhama*" in Arabic (plural: *malahem*) means epos, tales of heroism, prose and poetry glorifying epic battles.



Right: Insignia of the Guardians of the Religion Organization. Left: The wording of the pledge of allegiance of one of the organizations that seceded (Jaysh al-Malahem) to the Guardians of the Religion Organization (Noor Syria Twitter account, which is affiliated with the rebel organizations, March 4, 2018)

► On February 26, 2018, the Guardians of the Religion Organization published an announcement with the heading “**Save the Canopy of the Muslims,**” whose highlights are as follows (translated from the Arabic version)⁴:

- ◆ **The [jihadi] operatives in [eastern] Al-Ghouta are now suffering badly:** “[...] How will our life be pleasant when our people in Al-Ghouta are experiencing the most deadly bombs and missiles of the present day [...] How can you eat, drink and live a pleasant and comfortable life while your brothers are being burned with napalm and phosphorous, buried under the rubble of their homes [...]”
- ◆ **We must support the [jihadi] operatives in eastern Al-Ghouta:** “O our people, know that when the regime ends [the occupation of] Al-Ghouta, your fate is their fate, **if you do not support them from now on.**” Turn your guns and weapons toward your **enemy** and know that if you support [our people in Al-Ghouta], Allah will bring victory to you [...] **We promise you, our brothers, that we will do our utmost to lift the siege from you [...]**”

⁴ The first announcement was published on February 26, 2018 **in Arabic**. On March 5, 2018, the Guardians of the Religion Organization published the **English version**, entitled “**Save the Canopy of the Muslims.**” The Arabic term “**Canopy of the Muslims**” (Fustat al-Muslimeen) refers to a *hadith* (a collection of laws attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, which underlies the Oral Law in Islam), entitled “The Canopy of the Muslims on the Day of the Battle in Al-Ghouta”. Possible interpretations of the phrase “The Canopy of the Muslims” are the center of the country or the jihad camp (Tariq al-Khalas, an Islamic website preaching Islamization, July 13, 2014).

- ◆ **The [jihadi] groups operating in Syria must unite:** “[...] “We order the groups fighting in Greater Syria **to stop the fighting among us** so that we can be free for this tremendous obligation [...] **We will all hasten to repel this hostile enemy in order to alleviate the plight of our people in Al-Ghouta.**”



The first announcement issued by the Guardians of the Religion Organization (official Twitter account of the Guardians of the Religion Organization, February 27, 2018)

The leadership of the Guardians of the Religion Organization

- **The leadership of the Guardians of the Religion Organization comprises senior Al-Qaeda supporters in Syria.** Prominent among them is **a group of Jordanian operatives** formerly affiliated with **Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi**, the founder of the Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq (which gave rise to ISIS). These operatives opposed to the “Syrian” policy adapted by Abu Mohammad al-Julani and what they perceived as weakening and later severance of the ties **between Al-Julani and Al-Qaeda.**

- In late November 2017, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham carried out a series of arrests among the opponents of Abu Mohammad al-Julani. Prominent among those arrested was the “Jordanian group.” These operatives were accused of undermining the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham by spreading rumors and inciting rebellion among the operatives. The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham issued an announcement accusing one of these operatives, **Sheikh Sami al-Uraydi** (see below) of claiming that Abu Mohammad al-Julani deceived Ayman al-Zawahiri. **Abu Mohammad al-Julani had the upper hand** in the internal confrontation in the Headquarters for the

Liberation of Al-Sham, triggering **the withdrawal of his opponents and the establishment of the new organization.**

► **The leader of the Guardians of the Religion Organization is Samir Hejazi, codenamed Abu Humam al-Shami (or Farouq the Syrian).** Abu Humam al-Shami is a Syrian operative who had been in Afghanistan during 1998-1999. He pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden and joined his ranks. Several months before the American invasion, he was sent to Iraq for a “secret mission” on behalf of Al-Qaeda, where he met **Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi** (the founding father of ISIS).⁵ **Abu Humam al-Shami was arrested in Iraq** by the Iraqi authorities, was kept in prison for a short while **and handed over to the Syrian regime** (probably because he was Syrian). He was released by the Syrians and fled to Lebanon in 2005, when the Syrian authorities carried out a series of arrests among operatives belonging to “radical organizations.” In Lebanon, he was arrested for being involved in terrorism **and spent five years in Rumiya Prison.**

► In 2005, Abu Humam al-Shami was released. He returned to Afghanistan, where he operated under the command of a senior jihadi operative codenamed **Atiah Allah the Libyan**. This Al-Qaeda commander sent him **to operate in Syria under Al-Qaeda’s direct orders.** After the civil war in Syria broke out, **he joined the Al-Nusra Front and served as its general military commander.** On October 2017, he announced the establishment of a jihadi organization comprising immigrants, called **Ansar Al-Furqan** (“People of the Quran”), which considered itself an Al-Qaeda branch in Syria. Ansar Al-Furqan was suppressed by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, which arrested dozens of its operatives, including **Abu Humam al-Shami** (late November 2017).

⁵ **Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi** arrived in Iraq in 2002, before the US entered Iraq. He established a Kurdish jihadi organization under the name of **Ansar Al-Islam** in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq. He subsequently also established a jihadi organization of his own, named **Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad** (“the Oneness of Allah and Jihad”). After the US invasion of Iraq, Al-Zarqawi joined the armed groups that started fighting against the US army and became a prominent figure among the rebels. In October 2004, his organization joined Al-Qaeda. Al-Zarqawi pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden and established an organization named **Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers (i.e., Iraq)**. Later on, substantial and practical differences of opinion arose between Al-Zarqawi and Osama bin Laden, and Al-Zarqawi’s relations with Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda leadership deteriorated.



Abu Humam al-Shami while he served as the general military commander of the Al-Nusra Front (Al-Jazeera, March 6, 2018)

► Following are details about additional senior Al-Qaeda operatives reportedly **belonging to the leadership of the Guardians of the Religion Organization:**

◆ **Iyad al-Tubasi, codenamed Abu Julaybib the Jordanian:** A Jordanian Al-Qaeda operative serving as Number 2 in the leadership of the Guardians of the Religion Organization (Al-Modon, Lebanon, March 2, 2018). He fought in Iraq and was a co-founder of the Al-Nusra Front in Syria. He served as **commander of the Al-Nusra Front in Daraa** (southern Syria), but **seceded from the organization** after the announcement on the establishment of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the severe conflict that broke out between the new organization and the Al-Qaeda leadership (January 2017). In late November 2017, he was arrested by supporters of Abu Mohammad al-Julani, along with dozens of other operatives, supporters of Ayman al-Zawahiri.



Iyad al-Tubasi, codenamed Abu Julaybib the Jordanian (Top News, a news website affiliated with the Syrian regime, August 23, 2016)

◆ **Bilal Khreesat, codenamed Abu Khadija the Jordanian:** A Jordanian Al-Qaeda operative, one of the prominent commanders of the Al-Qaeda branch in Syria, in its various incarnations (the Al-Nusra Front, the Front for the liberation of Al-Sham, and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham). He served in a variety of posts, including as Emir of the Border Area (probably, the Daraa region) and official in charge of Sharia in several regions in Syria, including eastern Al-Ghouta and the Homs area. In his most recent post, he served as the official in charge of Sharia in the Idlib area. In early August 2016, after the Al-Nusra Front announced the establishment of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, Abu Khadija the Jordanian announced his **disassociation from the newly established organization**. The reason for that, he said, was the severance of ties between the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the Al-Qaeda organization.



**Bilal Khreesat, codenamed Abu Khadija the Jordanian
(Araby 21, August 23, 2016)**

◆ **Sheikh Dr. Sami al-Uraydi, codenamed Abu Mahmoud al-Shami:** A Jordanian cleric born in Amman, who had served as a senior Sharia authority in the Al-Nusra Front. One of Al-Qaeda's senior officials in Syria. He was one of the operatives who were arrested by the supporters of Abu Mohammad al-Julani as part of the series of arrests carried out in late November 2017.⁶

⁶ See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from February 24, 2014, "Sheikh Sami al-Uraydi: Portrait of a Jordanian cleric who serves as a senior religious authority for the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch."



Sami al-Uraydi preaching jihad to Al-Nusra Front operatives (dailymotion.com)

- ◆ **Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Makki:** One of the Al-Qaeda senior operatives who served in the Shura Council (the supreme leadership) of the Front for the Liberation of Al-Sham. In addition, he served as the emir of a group named Jaysh Al-Malahem (“the Army of the Tales of Heroism”), operating as part of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham. This group seceded from the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, along with five other groups, and joined the Guardians of the Religion Organization.
- ◆ **Khaled al-Arouri, codenamed Abu al-Qassam the Jordanian:** A Jordanian Al-Qaeda operative who had been in Iraq and served as Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi’s deputy. While he was in Iraq, he was pronounced dead in an American airstrike in 2006, but the report proved incorrect. In late November 2017, he was arrested by supporters of Abu Mohammad al-Julani in the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, along with dozens of other operatives.

Appendix

Secessions and merges among jihadi organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria

- ▶ **2004** – The establishment of an Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq headed by **Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi**, under the name of **Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers** (i.e., Iraq).
- ▶ **June 2006** – Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi eliminated by the Americans in a targeted killing.
- ▶ **October 2006** – The establishment of an umbrella framework of several jihadi organizations in Iraq, called **the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI)**.
- ▶ **2010** – The leadership of the Islamic State in Iraq eliminated by Iraqi security forces in collaboration with US forces. Previous leadership replaced by **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi** (ISIS’s current leader).
- ▶ **January 2012** – The establishment of **the Al-Nusra Front (“the Assistance Front”)** as the Syrian branch of the Islamic State in Iraq, headed by **Abu Mohammad al-Julani**.
- ▶ **April 2013** – Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announcing a merge between the Islamic State in Iraq and the Al-Nusra Front under his command. The new organization was called **The Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS)**. Abu Mohammad al-Julani objected to this move, refused to subject himself to Al-Baghdadi, and pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.
- ▶ **July 2016** – The Al-Nusra Front announcing the establishment of a new umbrella framework called **The Front for the Liberation of Al-Sham** (Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham). Ayman al-Zawahiri and his supporters in Syria objected to this move.
- ▶ **January 2017** – A new umbrella framework comprising five rebel groups, **with Abu Mohammad al-Julani’s organization as the dominant element**, established under the name of **the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham** (Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham). Ayman al-Zawahiri and his supporters in Syria objected to this move.
- ▶ **February 2018** – The establishment of a new organization affiliated with the Al-Qaeda leadership, called **the Guardians of the Religion Organization**, headed by **Abu Humam al-Shami**.