



ISIS has declared the death of its leader and the appointment of a new leader

August 7, 2023

Highlights

- ▶ On August 3, 2023, ISIS's Al-Furqan Media Foundation released an audiotape with a statement by **Abu Hudhaifa al-Ansari, ISIS's spokesman**. In the tape, the organization's spokesman announces the **death of Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi, the organization's leader, and the appointment of Abu Hafs al-Hashemi al-Qurashi as his replacement**.
- ▶ ISIS's spokesman blames the leader's death on the Al-Qaeda-affiliated HTS, which is considered the dominant organization in the rebel enclave in Idlib. He denies the official version published by Turkey, according to which Al-Qurashi was killed by Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT). HTS issued a statement denying its involvement in killing ISIS's leader. It should be noted that alongside the news of his death, rumors also circulated about the ouster of the leader even before he was killed.
- ▶ Although the date of his death is not specified on the audiotape, the ITIC estimates that he was killed in April 2023. As ISIS has done in the past, this time too, the information about the leader's death has not been officially published by ISIS. This is apparently because the organization waited for a new leader to be chosen by the Shura Council and for establishing support and recognition for his appointment by the operatives in the various provinces.
- ▶ This is the fourth leader of ISIS killed since the establishment of the organization. The last three leaders were killed after a relatively short term of office and it seems that their term of office is getting shorter after the first leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, served for six and a half years while the last leader served only six months. It should be noted that the short terms of office of the organization's leaders and the high turnover of the organization's leaders are a severe blow to ISIS's power, capabilities, and image. It should also be noted that the four leaders were killed on Syrian soil, to which the center of gravity of the organization's leadership has moved. All four were killed in areas where the Syrian government had limited control (Idlib and Daraa).

► If HTS is indeed responsible for the leader's death, this is the second time that ISIS's leader has been killed by a rival organization in Syria. This time it is an organization affiliated with Al-Qaeda operating in the Idlib region. It is possible that his death will lead to attempts by ISIS operatives to carry out a series of acts of revenge.

Main messages of the audiotape



The opening slide of the audiotape (Telegram, August 3, 2023)

► On August 3, 2023, ISIS's Al-Furqan Media Foundation released an audiotape, about 27 minutes long, in which **ISIS spokesman Abu Hudhaifa al-Ansari** announced the death of **ISIS's leader Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi** and the appointment of **Abu Hafs al-Hashemi al-Qurashi as his replacement**. The spokesman did not provide details revealing the identity of the previous or new leader other than their noms de guerre. The following are details that emerge from the audiotape:

- ◆ **The circumstances of the leader's death:** Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi was killed in one of the towns on the periphery of Idlib when HTS operatives tried to arrest him. He tried to resist arrest with his weapon but was killed during the fighting. HTS operatives were not satisfied with this and detained, in one of the nearby towns, **Abu Omar al-Muhajir, the organization's spokesman**, and several other operatives, including women.

- ◆ **Those responsible for his death:** The spokesman blames the leader's death on the HTS ("the headquarters for the abandonment of Islam and cooperation [with Turkey], the tails [proxies] of Turkish intelligence"). This is a rival organization affiliated with Al-Qaeda most of whose activity focuses on the rebel enclave in Idlib (northern Syria, southwest of Aleppo). The spokesman notes that HTS operatives handed over the body to the Turkish authorities. The spokesman also denies the official Turkish version,

according to which the leader was killed in activity carried out by Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT), noting that the Turkish authorities distorted the facts for the purposes of the presidential elections held in Turkey at the time.¹ The spokesman threatens revenge, noting that sooner or later HTS will receive its reward either from its "masters" (the Turks) or from the "believers" (ISIS's operatives).

◆ **Announcing a new leader:** Upon learning of the leader's death, the Shura Council (the organization's senior leadership) met and decided to appoint **Abu Hafs al-Hashemi al-Qurashi** as the new organization's leader. The spokesman calls on the operatives to unite around the new leader and pledge allegiance to him wherever they are. No identifying details about the new leader are provided. In this context, the spokesman stresses that death, imprisonment, and expulsion are an inseparable part of the path of jihad and that this does not deter the organization's operatives and commanders, who are loyal to the path of Allah and adhere to it. According to him, the killing of the organization's leaders has not, to the dismay of the organization's enemies, brought an end to its path because there will always be someone who will carry the flag.

◆ **Appeal to the organization's prisoners:** He calls on the prisoners to be patient and declares that the organization is working for their release. In this context, it should be noted **that** ISIS attaches great importance to the release of its prisoners and has carried out many operations, in several of its provinces, trying to release them by force.

◆ **Call on the organization's supporters to continue on their path:** ISIS's operatives and **supporters** must adhere to the organization's path in light of the corruption and immorality prevalent in the world, the Saudi regime's "heretical activity" in the holy cities of Islam, Mecca and Medina, and the violations of the Jews at Al-Aqsa mosque, which, according to him, are supported by the Christian West ("the Crusaders").

◆ **The situation of the United States:** Referring to the issue, the spokesman notes that Allah is **striking** the United States and that it has been weakened militarily because it persecutes ISIS operatives. According to him, the United States has already suffered

¹ On April 30, 2023, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that on April 29, 2023, in activity by Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT) in northwestern Syria, ISIS leader Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi was killed. The information was not confirmed by other sources and was not addressed by ISIS.

severe blows due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic crises, the "internal Crusader war" (the war in Ukraine), and more.

- In response to ISIS's announcement, HTS issued a statement categorically denying its involvement in killing ISIS's leader. The announcement notes that although the HTS position towards ISIS is clear and it is working to remove ISIS from the rebel enclave in Idlib, had ISIS's leader been killed by HTS, it would have issued an immediate announcement on the matter (Syria TV, August 5, 2023)



The HTS denial (Syria TV, August 5, 2023)

- It should be noted that already on May 4, 2023, about a month before he was killed, **Hussam Hammoud, a journalist and analyst** based in Al-Raqqah, reported that ISIS leader Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi had been removed from office by the decision of the organization's Shura Council. This was after disagreements arose between him and senior ISIS leaders regarding the organization's military activity. According to Hammoud, Al-Qurashi called for carrying out operations against prisons of the Kurdish SDF forces in northeastern Syria, where ISIS operatives are being held, whereas senior figures in the organization's leadership opposed the move, describing it as "reckless." In addition, Hammoud reported that a new ISIS leader had been appointed, also in his assessment of Iraqi origin. He also assessed that the new leader would be based in Syria's desert area (Al-Badia) or in Iraq's Al-Anbar Desert (@Hussam Hammoud Twitter account, May 4, 2023).

Pledges of allegiance to the new leader

- So far, operatives from Iraq, West Africa, Somalia, and Yemen have pledged allegiance to the new leader (Telegram, August 5, 2023). As news of the appointment of the new leader spreads, announcements of the pledge of allegiance from other provinces are expected to be published in the coming days.



Iraq Province operatives pledge allegiance to the new leader (Telegram, August 5, 2023)



West Africa Province operatives pledge allegiance to the new leader (Telegram, August 5, 2023)

Appendix

ISIS leaders

► **Abu Hafs al-Hashemi al-Qurashi** is the fifth leader appointed to head the organization since its establishment in 2013. The death of the previous leader only six months after he was elected indicates that since the death of the organization's founder, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the term of office of the organization's leaders has been significantly shortened to only a few months. This is despite the fact that their identities are not revealed, and they are publicly known only by their noms de guerre. The first two leaders were killed in operations carried out by the US Army and the other two were killed by organizations operating in Syria that oppose ISIS (the Free Syrian Army and HTS). Three of the leaders were killed in the Idlib area in northwestern Syria and one in the Daraa area in southwestern Syria. Following are details of the organization's leaders and the circumstances of their deaths:

- ◆ **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi** served for six and a half years, from April 7, 2013, to October 27, 2019. He was killed in an operation carried out by an elite unit of the US Army in the town of Barisha, about 25 km north of Idlib, near the Syrian-Turkish border. Several members of his family **and** several other operatives were killed along with him. Al-Baghdadi blew himself up in a tunnel with an explosive belt he was carrying after noticing that US forces were closing in on him.²

- ◆ **Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurashi** served two years and three months, from October 31, 2019, to February 3, 2022. He was killed in a US Army Special Forces operation in the town of **Atma in Idlib Province in northwestern Syria**. He blew himself up at the beginning of the operation because he refused to surrender to the US forces. The explosion **also** killed his wife and two children (US Department of Defense website, February 4, 2022).³

- ◆ **Abu al-Hassan al-Hashemi al-Qurashi** served in this position for about seven months, between **March 10, 2022**, and mid-October 2022. According to the US Central

² See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from October 29, 2019, "The significance of the killing of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Initial assessment)"

³ See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from February 15, 2022, "The killing of ISIS's leader in an operation by US forces in Syria and possible implications"

Command, he was killed in mid-October 2022 in a military operation conducted by the Free Syrian Army in the Daraa Province in Syria (southwestern Syria).⁴

◆ **Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi**, who served from mid-October 2022 to April 2023, only six months, was killed, as stated, by HTS operatives in the Idlib area.

⁴ See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from December 4, 2022, "ISIS has officially announced the death of the organization's leader and the appointment of a new leader"