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International Institute
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INSIGHTS

Attiya Allah al-Libi – A Person of Influence on the Salafi-Jihadist Movement in the Gaza Strip

Introduction

In 2015, in the framework of activities by the Salafi-jihadist movement in the Gaza Strip, the Dar al-Mujahideen publishing house published a volume containing all of the writings, speeches and notes of Sheikh Attiya Allah al-Libi, a senior member of Al-Qaeda, a prominent ideologue and one of the central figures in the world of jihad until his death in August 2011.

The mere fact that this volume was published four years after Attiya Allah's death testifies to his importance in the jihadist thought and his influence on the Salafist thought and ideology of Al-Qaeda supporters even today. The publication of the volume by the Salafi-jihadist movement in Gaza indicates that members of this movement identify with Attiya Allah's doctrine in particular, and with Al-Qaeda's ideology in general.

This document includes a general review of the thick volume – which contains at least 2,000 pages – in an attempt to extract the central themes and issues that occupied Attiya Allah and that continue to occupy his supporters and readers.

Biography

Attiya Allah al-Libi ("the Libyan") – less known by his full name, Abu Abd al-Rahman Jamal bin Ibrahim Ashtawi – was born in the city of Misrata in Libya in 1969 or 1970. It seems that he first made contact with the world of jihad in late 1988 when he joined Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, led by Osama bin Laden. According to testimony published by his acquaintances, Attiya Allah participated in some of the large battles waged by the organization in this arena, such as the operation to capture Khost.¹

Following the liberation of Afghanistan from the Soviet regime, Attiya Allah moved to Sudan and joined other Al-Qaeda leaders who had moved there, including bin Laden himself. In 1995, under bin Laden's instruction, he moved to Algeria in order to lead jihad in this arena but the experience did not work out and Attiya Allah narrowly escaped from the GIA (Armed Islamic Group of Algeria), which harassed him after he disagreed with their actions. From Algeria, Attiya Allah returned to Afghanistan and was there during the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States. After the attacks, with the US invasion into Iraq, bin Laden instructed Attiya Allah to move to Iraq in order to lead jihad there

¹ October 15, 2013. <https://web.archive.org/web/20131015225413/http://sheikh-atiyah.nokbah.org/d.html>

alongside Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, but he was not able to enter Iraq and was forced to turn back. Despite his failed attempt to infiltrate into the Iraqi arena, Attiya Allah spent the last five years of his life (2006-2011) in a central and important role in Al-Qaeda's leadership. According to investigations of detained Al-Qaeda members, Attiya Allah was a member of the organization's small Shura Council² and even became the number two leader following the deaths of Osama bin Laden and Saeed al-Masri. In August 2011, Atiyya Allah was killed in a US drone strike in Pakistan along with his son, Issam.



A poem in memory of Attiya Allah al-Libi, a senior ideologue and Al-Qaeda veteran

The Preface to the Volume

Evidence of Attiya Allah's importance and centrality can be found in the preface to the volume that was written by global jihad figures, including the following:

- Sayf al-Adl, a member of Al-Qaeda's Shura Council who is still alive and free.
- Abu Qatada al-Filastini, a senior cleric in the Salafi-jihadist movement.
- Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a senior cleric in the Salafi-jihadist movement.
- Abu Maria al-Qahtani, a senior member of Al-Nusra Front.
- Hani al-Sibai, an Islamic preacher who supports Al-Qaeda and operates from London.
- Abu Iyad al-Tunisi, the leader of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia until his death.

² November 27, 2014. <http://www.alakhbar.info/news/6942-2014-11-27-15-36-01.htmlv>

Since some of these figures knew Attiya Allah personally, they praised not only his work in the field of explaining and promoting jihad, but they also expressed their admiration for his personality traits, including his moderation, honesty and pleasant manner, while presenting him as the “true spirit” of Al-Qaeda.

One point that all of the writers of the preface emphasized was Attiya Allah’s relevance to jihad today, even after his death. Abu Qatada, for example, noted that although Attiya Allah “appeared for a short time only in the open dawah arena, his influence on young jihadists today remains enormous”, especially in light of the fact that he provided information and answers to many questions in a variety of fields, particularly on to issues related to jihad.

Even Abu Maria al-Qahtani emphasized the difference between the depth of Attiya Allah’s ideology and philosophy and “the sentimental speeches and Hollywood productions” of the Islamic State, and he called on those responsible for shari’a in Al-Qaeda to revive the legacy of Attiya Allah and instill it in the younger generation.

The various forewords and things that were written in Attiya Allah’s memory paint an image of him as a combination of a clergyman and warrior who ties together thought and action. A prominent example of this was the terrorist attack that Al-Qaeda carried out at the CIA headquarters in December 2009, an attack whose planning was attributed to Attiya Allah. Nevertheless, his operational capabilities mentioned in other sources (such as his expertise in explosive materials and mortar shell launches) ³ do not appear in this document, which places greater emphasis on the religious and ideological aspects of his character.

Topics and Themes

Since the volume is composed of many writings that were published over the years, this is an attempt to sort them according to topic. After the multiple introductions and a review of his life, the volume turns to the advance of jihad in various arenas around the world, according to the following geographic distribution: Afghanistan and Pakistan, Palestine and Syria, Sudan and Somalia, Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula and the Maghreb. Then, the book’s composers turned to the following topics: jihadist propaganda, religious knowledge and jihadist sages, and religious issues concerning jihad. The following chapters are dedicated to a variety of topics, including the “Islamic State of Iraq” (the

³ November 20, 2013. <http://goo.gl/sxkUtQ>

predecessor of the Islamic State), the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Palestinian issue and the revolutions in the Arab world.

A significant portion of the volume contains fatwas by the sheikh, questions and answers that were collected from discussions held on jihadist forums (for instance, on Al-Hisba network), transcripts of audio and video lectures as well as letters and documents written by Attiya Allah during various periods of his life (including a copy of a handwritten letter).

The following titles are examples taken from the list of Attiya Allah's important articles and essays: *Words of Support for the Islamic State of Iraq; The Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Issue – an Inside Look; Answer to a Questions Regarding Defensive Jihad; Arab Revolutions and the Harvest Season;* and more.

A significant portion of the volume (approximately 400 pages) is dedicated to an open meeting that was held by Sheikh Attiya Allah on the Islamic Al-Hisba network, material that was originally published in jihadist forums in 2006. The meeting was essentially a series of questions posed by visitors and the answers provided by Attiya Allah on a range of topics. After a discussion about the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the questions and answers are expanded into several main axes:

- The jihad process in general
 - o A review of the positive aspects (the rise of Islam's radiance in wars throughout the world, the increase in Muslim morale and exposure of "traitor tyrants") of jihad activity in our time.
 - o An assessment of the positive and negative implications of the 9/11 attacks and their influence on the Taliban-Afghanistan.
 - o The effect of the global coalition against the mujahideen.
 - o A discussion regarding 'for how long will jihad continue to be only jihad of attrition?'
 - o A discussion regarding jihad in Algeria and encouragement for the mujahideen in this arena to swear allegiance to bin Laden.
 - o A discussion regarding the jihadist discourse.
 - o A discussion regarding jihad in various arenas, including: Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Algeria, Sudan, Iran and Syria.
 - o A discussion regarding jihad in North Africa.
 - o A discussion regarding a Hudna (ceasefire) in one arena in order to strengthen jihad in

another arena.

- A discussion regarding the battle against the distant enemy.
 - A discussion regarding US-Iran relations, the execution of terrorist attacks in hotels and against oil facilities.
 - A discussion regarding the influence of Sayyid Qutb and Abdullah Azzam on jihadist thought.
 - A discussion regarding the way to promote dawah among the youth despite the difficulties and limitations.
- Afghanistan, Taliban and the region
 - Jihad in Darfur, Sudan, Somalia and the region
 - Clerics
 - Jihadist Islamic propaganda
 - Issues regarding jurisprudence of jihad
 - Miscellaneous

From an analysis of the answers given by Attiya Allah, it is evident that he does use moderate language and avoids making decisive statements. For example, in one response he explains that the focus should be on one enemy – the United States – after which all of the others will fall, but in another response regarding the choice between the close enemy and the distant enemy, he avoids giving an explicit answer and explains that each arena must be examined on its merits.

Palestine

In the chapter about Palestine, Attiya Allah refers to Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. He disagrees with Hamas's identification with the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Jihad's identification with Shi'ite Iran, and explains that he disagrees with these two movements ideologically and conceptually (but he makes a distinction between the organization's belief system in general and the details that comprise it). On another point, Attiya claims that "the failure of the Hamas movement" testifies to the need for "true and pure jihad" that does not participate in the "democratic game" or strives to receive international legitimization. Nonetheless, Attiya expresses his support for Hamas's struggle against the Jews (even if it is jihad of attrition) and strictly forbids declaring its members as traitors, apostates or infidels. With regard to the Salafist movement in

Palestine, Attiya recommends that its fighters not act independently but rather collaborate with Hamas and the Islamic Jihad for now, or alternatively travel to one of the arenas of jihad in Iraq or Afghanistan. With regard to reconciliation with the Jews, Attiya explains that it is forbidden in principle since the Jews in Israel stole part of Muslim land but that it is permissible as long as it is within a time frame not exceeding ten years.

Iraq

An extensive chapter was dedicated to jihad in Iraq, which is presented as “the heart of the Islamic world and the land of the caliphate and civilization”. In the framework of his answers to questions regarding Iraq, Attiya welcomes the establishment of the Mujahideen Shura Council, calls for unity among the ranks of jihad groups, anticipates a US retreat from Iraq, and presents Shi’ite fighters as the enemy and a legitimate target. It is apparent that in his response Attiya is trying to maintain relative moderation and avoid criticism that could provoke conflicts. For instance, in his answer to one question, Attiya refuses to criticize Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and takes pains to emphasize that since he is far from the Iraqi arena, he is unfit to express an opinion. In the same spirit, Attiya responds that there is no religious obligation to swear allegiance to Al-Qaeda, that loyalty to the value of jihad precedes organizational loyalty, and that one must always strive for unity and inclusion of all groups under one banner. Similarly, in the context of Sunni security personnel serving in the ranks of the army and police, Attiya demonstrates moderation and avoids a comprehensive declaration of *takfir* on all of them, claiming that each case must be examined on its own merits. There are additional examples in other places of Attiya Allah’s relative moderation, or pragmatism, including his reference to a clip from a speech by al-Zarqawi in which he claimed that jihad activities should not be canceled even if a certain number of Muslims will be killed, as happened in the 9/11 attacks and other attacks. Attiya expresses reservations about this statement but, at the same time, speaks positively about al-Zarqawi and claims that he did not declare *takfir* on all Muslims (p. 1381). In addition (p. 1383), Attiya calls on Muslims to vote against the application of American law in Iraq. He claims that the act of voting does not indicate an acceptance of democracy, a step that the Islamic State, for example, refuses altogether.

In this context, it is interesting to note that most of Attiya’s responses regarding Iraq include a geopolitical analysis that predicts, among other things, the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq in the event of an American retreat. Attiya writes:

“If America will leave, humiliated and despised, it will make possible the formation of the nucleus of the long desired Islamic State that can be called a state, an emirate or any other name. It is expected to be formed in Sunni populated areas, especially in Al-Anbar.”

In my opinion, there is no need to make an effort to establish a state in the familiar sense, that is, adherence to borders, existence of institutions and administrations in the field, a nation confined to a particular domain, etc. Do not act recklessly since a state needs energy and is likely to turn into an easy target for the enemy” (p. 253).

In addition, Attiya warns about the “need for energy” involved in the transition from a movement to a state and he recommends that, at this stage, the mujahideen serve only as supervisors and leave the job of managing the day-to-day lives of civilians to the local authorities. Another notable point about Attiya can be found in his frequent warnings not to kill innocent Muslims. The volume contains several places where Attiya Allah mentions the importance of avoiding the killing of Muslims in public places such as outdoor markets and mosques. He also warned against the over-use of *Al-Tattarus*, the use of Muslims as “human shields” in times of war (p. 1457).

The Arabian Peninsula

In this chapter, Attiya Allah discusses jihad in the Arabian Peninsula, especially Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). He first refers to bin Laden’s intention to make the US (the “distant enemy”) a priority target over local regimes (the “close enemy”) but in the case of AQAP, the government dragged the organization into direct conflict. Attiya Allah praises AQAP for its activities both on the conceptual and religious level (the distribution of appropriate content in terms of non-radical *Aqida* [creed] and unnecessary *takfir*), and on the practical and military level (emphasis on attacks against American targets in this arena and against oil facilities that serve the interests of Saudi Arabia and the US).

Algeria, Sahara and the Arab Maghreb

In this chapter, Attiya Allah responds to questions regarding jihad in North Africa and analyzes, among other things, the reasons that jihad in Algeria failed and did not spread to the rest of the countries in the Maghreb (Attiya attributes this failure mainly to the extremism of the GIA and its failed leadership and less to the penetration of the organization by intelligence systems). Regarding the role that the mujahideen in Algeria can fill for the sake of Al-Qaeda’s global jihad, Attiya notes that they can offer refuge to the mujahideen from other arena and cooperate with the rest of the groups in the Maghreb,

such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG).

Indeed, in the context of the Libyan arena, Attiya praises the LIFG in terms of ideology and leadership but he notes that it was almost paralyzed in terms of its operational capabilities. With regard to imposing *takfir* on Libyan security forces, Attiya makes a distinction between ordinary military soldiers who are not necessarily infidels and those who belong to agencies close to Muammar Qaddafi and identify with his ideology. Also in this context, Attiya Allah permits – and even encourages – attacks against American companies operating in Libya.

Jihadist Propaganda

In this chapter, Attiya responds to questions concerning the media aspects of jihad while emphasizing the importance of jihadist propaganda and the need to innovate and diversify in order to remain attractive to the viewer, and in order to reach as many people as possible. In addition, Attiya explains that jihadist propaganda must create interesting content and transmit their abbreviated version to the media channels in order to enable a wider distribution of jihad messages (he recommends sending the full version to jihadist Web sites and forums on the Internet).

Knowledge, Clerics and Jihad

In this chapter, Attiya discusses the connection between clerics and the mujahideen, as well as the importance of this connection, while warning about “the clerics of the rulers” who distort Islam and act against jihad, according to him. With regard to declaring those clerics to be infidels, Attiya rejects this move and claims that each case must be examined on its merits unless it involves a religious scholar who openly declared that mujahideen should be killed. In addition, Attiya permits clerics who secretly support jihad to avoid supporting it publicly if they are subject to immediate danger.

Issues in Jihad and Miscellaneous

In the framework of these two chapters, Attiya responds to various questions posed to him regarding jihad. The questions deal with a range of topics, such as the issue of “the excuse of ignorance” (exempting someone from being declared a heretic), the impact of bombings in Islamic countries on public support for Al-Qaeda, the difference between the Khawarej and the mujahideen, reference to the religious status of Shi’ites, the possibility of establishing alliances with secular movements, and clarification regarding permission to take captive Jewish and Christian women. In the chapter, “Miscellaneous”, Attiya Allah discusses various personalities from the world of jihad, some of whom he knew personally. Attiya Allah’s words in the summary to this section, which was composed in

September 2006, demonstrate his religious legal and ideological approach in general – an approach of skepticism and refraining from making firm conclusions.

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One of the interesting chapters in the book appears under the title, “Words of Support for the Islamic State of Iraq”, the predecessor of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Alongside an analysis of the chosen name and the significance of the oath of allegiance to the caliph, the chapter includes a call on all jihadist groups operating in Iraq to join the ranks of the Islamic State of Iraq and merge into it. In addition to his support for the organization, Attiya also adds recommendations and words of warning. Among other things, he calls on members of the Islamic State of Iraq to demonstrate patience and forgiveness towards those who do not join their ranks immediately and urges them to take pains to behave properly in order to gain legitimacy from the public. In addition, Attiya notes that Muslims outside of the Islamic State of Iraq’s territory are not obligated to swear allegiance to it.

Later in the chapter, Attiya responds to claims and criticism that were raised against the Islamic State of Iraq, such as the small territory in which the organization operates, the possibility that it will bring about the division of Iraq, or the relative anonymity of its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The chapter ends with advice to Muslims living under the organization’s rule to display restraint towards the mujahideen operating in their area.

In the chapter titled, “Hezbollah and the Palestinian Issue – An Inside Look”, Attiya devotes effort to emphasize Hezbollah as a “sectarian and zealot Shi’ite organization that serves the great Khomeinist Shi’ite strategy”. In this framework, Attiya presents instances in which Hezbollah, or its predecessor – the Amal movement – was partner to crimes against the Sunni population, such as the massacre in Sabra and Shatila.

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The next chapter in the volume includes questions and answers by Attiya Allah that were collected for him by Al-Yaqin Media Center. The questions deal with a variety of subjects, including: The general assessment of the state of Islam and jihad on a global level, an assessment of jihad activities in Iraq, reference to the claim that only fools join jihad, the reasons for the Islamic State in Iraq’s failure to garner popular support, reference to the claim that anyone who does not swear allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq is considered an infidel, allegations of penetration into jihad organizations, the advantages of jihad forums that are used for discourse and advice for the young people of the

“jihadist propaganda” and visitors to the forums. It should be noted that a central part of the chapter deals with the issue of “defensive jihad”, jihad that is considered the obligation of every Muslim should a Muslim country be attacked by the infidel enemy.

Additional chapters include Attiya Allah’s articles that were published by Al-Qaeda’s various media outlets, such as: the magazine belonging to Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, *Vanguards of Khorasan*, or Al-Fajr Media Center, which is the official distributor of the organization’s propaganda. The articles in this section deal with – among other things – the following topics: treatment of infidels, the balance between using force and a gentle approach, a clarification of the difference between jihad and violence, and condemnation of the bombings in Muslim markets. One of the articles includes notes and commentary on the book, *Leaderless Jihad* by Marc Sageman. It is important to note that a significant portion of these articles are of a more religious than political nature, such as in the interpretation of the Hadith or details of the virtues of the Prophet Muhammad’s wives.

The next section includes questions and additional articles that were published by Nukhbat al-I’lam al-Jihadi and Al-Sahab media institutions from 2010-2011 and deal with jihadist issues similar in content to publications that appear earlier in the volume. Worthy of special attention are articles by Attiya Allah that deal with the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt (that were published by Al-Fajr media institution and the *Vanguards of Khorasan* magazine). Attiya Allah praises the uprisings and calls on young Muslims in these countries not to act recklessly, to carry out dawah among the people in a refined manner and to avoid conflicts with other Islamic movements (such as Al-Nadha movement in Tunisia). On the other hand, Attiya Allah claims that they should not succumb to pacifism and not to make the mistake of thinking that they can make a real change without the need for jihad. The revolutions of the “Arab Spring”, from Al-Qaeda’s perspective, are only meant to be the first stage towards deep-rooted change that will lead to the application of shari’a and Islamic rule in these countries, and not to the replacement of one “dictator” with another or with a democratic regime.

Other questions deal with a range of issues, such as: Attiya Allah’s attitude towards Ibn Tamiyya and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, the implications of the 9/11 attacks on the jihadist movement, Attiya Allah’s attitude towards the Taliban-Afghanistan, and the book, “Fruits of Jihad” by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi.

A special chapter dedicated to questions from the mujahideen in Gaza is based on the Abbottabad

documents that were published by US intelligence agencies. The questions were directed at the sheikh by the Army of Islam organization in Gaza and deal with the following issues: whether it is forbidden or permitted to receive money from other Palestinian organizations (such as the Islamic Jihad or Fatah), whether it is permitted to attack drug dealers and steal their money, and whether it is permitted to harness the drugs for war against the Jews (for instance, by selling the drugs to Jews in order to cause them harm). On the issue of money, Attiya Allah responded that it is better to accept money from these organizations than to abandon jihad against the Jews. Regarding the drugs, Attiya Allah explained that it is permitted to accept money that drug dealers contribute to jihad but it is forbidden to use and distribute the drugs, even in the framework of war against the Jews.

The question and answer section ends with a series of short chapters that include a variety of questions that were addressed to the sheikh by various sources. For example: questions from the mujahideen in Somalia regarding the religious legal complexities that can arise in assassinations; questions from Abu Mus'ab al-Kurdi regarding the laws of the Oneness of God; a question from an exiled mujahid regarding the laws of intimacy; and approximately 40 questions from Sheikh Abu Zayd Khaled al-Hasinan al-Kuwaiti regarding issues surrounding *bid'a* (heretic innovation).

It should be noted that the Abbottabad documents include personal letters to various jihad leaders, including Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Abu Basir al-Wuhayshi (the leader of AQAP), to the Emir of the Taliban-Afghanistan and to Osama bin Laden himself.

The next chapter titled, "Attiya Allah – Articles, Letters, Qasidas, Introductions to Books and Notes" also contains a variety of issues, some of which were already mentioned in other parts of the volume, such as: the issue of jihad in Algeria, questions and answers to writers on forums, eulogies for jihadist who have passed away, and more.

An interesting essay included in this section titled, "Guidelines for Jihadist Propaganda Activity" is a letter of sorts that was distributed to supervisors on the forums and to Al-Qaeda's PR people. In this essay, Attiya Allah explains the basic features necessary for jihadist Islamic discourse (including integrity, logic, clarity and attractiveness), and addresses the possibilities of developing propaganda and maintaining the security of jihadist propaganda distributors. With regard to the publications themselves, Attiya Allah offers a great deal of advice, including: avoid using offensive words, avoid showing the slaughter of enemy forces and document martyrs in a manner that preserves their dignity. In another place, Attiya refers to the question of beheading infidels, and notes that the

answer is complicated and perhaps it is preferable to execute by gunfire. In addition, Attiya addresses the issue of documenting beheadings and broadcasting them in the media, and emphasizes that such a thing is liable to harm the image of Muslims (p. 1362).

As for the Shi'ites, Attia Allah notes that one should wage a polemic against them, ensure that their status is inferior to the Sunnis and prevent them from achieving power (p. 1282). Nevertheless, Attiya Allah does not view Shi'ites as deserving death – another example of his relative moderation as compared to the Islamic State, which calls for the destruction of Shi'ites everywhere because of their subversion.

Summary

An examination of the writings of Attiya Allah assembled in this volume reveals a number of characteristics and principles that guided the sheikh's world view and beliefs. In accordance with Al-Qaeda's outlook, Attiya Allah emphasizes the focus on the "distant enemy" (the United States) over the "near enemy" (the "infidel" regimes in various Arab countries), calls for *takfir* to be used with extreme caution, and for the lives of Shi'ites to be spared as long as they are living under Sunni regime. Evidence of his relative pragmatism and moderation can also be found in his frequent warnings to avoid the killing of innocent Muslims and his insistence that propaganda should not cause viewers to recoil (in contrast to Islamic State propaganda today). It seems that this approach by Attiya Allah stems not only from a belief in the justice of his path, but also from his vision of popular support from the Sunni Muslim public and the realization of Al-Qaeda's long-term goals. The publication of this volume by the Salafi-jihadist movement in Gaza attests to the relevance of Attiya Allah's outlook even today.

ABOUT THE ICT

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