

**Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's Letter as Evidence of a Deep Rift  
between the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham, and the Al-Nusra Front  
and Al-Qaeda**

During January 2014, there was another indication of the deep rift between the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham, and the Al-Nusra Front and Al-Qaeda, with the publication of a letter written by Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. Al-Maqdisi is considered the father of the Salafi-jihadist movement in Jordan and a senior spiritual authority within the movement in general. Today he is imprisoned in a Jordanian jail, accused of involvement in terrorism, aiding terrorism, and supporting the Afghani Taliban. On January 14, 2013, the Al-Jazeera media network published a letter that al-Maqdisi wrote, in which he explicitly admonished the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham for its irresponsible operations in the arena of jihad in Syria, which he not only considered to be a subversion against Al-Qaeda, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, but also a potentially damaging threat against the mujahideen's efforts to topple the Syrian regime and establish an Islamic state based on shari'a [Islamic law] on Syrian soil.

The first public manifestation of the split between the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham took place in April 2013, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham, announced the merger of his organization with the Al-Nusra Front and changed the name of his organization from the Islamic State of Iraq to the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham. Abu Mohammed al-Julani, leader of the Al-Nusra Front, responded by rejecting al-Baghdadi's announcement, declaring that the Al-Nusra Front was an extension of Al-Qaeda in Syria, and swearing allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri. The rising tensions between the two organizations led al-Zawahiri to become personally involved in the matter. In a letter that he wrote to the two leaders on May 23, 2013, and which was published by Al-Jazeera in June 2013, al-Zawahiri announced that the merger of the two organization was null and void, and he demanded that al-Baghdadi go back his previous work, namely focusing on operations in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Al-Baghdadi did not adhere to al-Zawahiri's demand and disputed his claims, insisting that the merger that he announced was still in effect. This blatant act of defiance challenged al-Zawahiri's leadership.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the text of the letter, see: <http://www.aljazeera.net/file/Get/64c64867-0eb8-4368-a1fd-13c7afbc9aa3>. Al-Zawahiri appointed a mediator and sent him to reconcile between al-Baghdadi and al-Julani. According to unconfirmed reports that were published on a Twitter account called, "Wikileaks of al-Baghdadi's State: An Investigative Account Into the Secrets of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham and its Internal Management", the mediation attempts failed. See: <https://twitter.com/wikibaghdady>.

See also: *Al-Akhbar*, January 10, 2014. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/198403>

<sup>2</sup> For further details regarding the source of this crisis, see: "The Crisis in the Syrian Arena of Jihad", *ICT's Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group*, October 21, 2013.

On November 8, 2013, Al-Jazeera published al-Zawahiri's letter for the second time, this time via audio recording. *Al-Jazeera*, November 8, 2013. <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/4a28f44d-1fda-4f2e-8947-295ef5756336>

For its part, activists in the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham concentrated their efforts on a comprehensive publicity campaign that targeted members of Islamic factions taking part in the battle against the Syrian regime, in order to persuade them to join the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham, and they swore allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This project was met with considerable success and many jihad activists in Syria swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi. For example, Abu Omar al-Shishani, leader of the Muhajireen Brigade and Al-Ansar, a group of foreign fighters in Syria, left his organization and joined the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham together with several of his followers, and swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham also garnered the support of Salafi-jihadist clerics, including Abu Hamam al-Athari, Abu Hamam al-Azdi and Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti. The three clerics published religious rulings and missives that called on the mujahideen to swear allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. For example, al-Athari noted that the Shura Council of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham had unanimously agreed to make al-Baghdadi the "Emir of the Faithful" (a title reserved for the ruler of the Muslim Nation): "We call on the mujahideen in Al-Sham to swear allegiance to al-Baghdadi as Emir of the Muslims".<sup>3</sup> On December 3, 2013, Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti published a letter in which he also plead with the mujahideen in Al-Sham and Iraq to swear allegiance to al-Baghdadi: "All fighting groups in Iraq and Al-Sham should join the Islamic State [of Iraq and Al-Sham] due to the obligation to appoint an imam to which every Muslim must swear allegiance. Regretfully, however, many groups are still being influenced by the need for independence and are avoiding swearing allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham, as if they are not interested in doing so [...]".<sup>4</sup> In January 2014, al-Athari published another missive, this time criticizing al-Julani for his refusal to join the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham and to swear allegiance to al-Baghdadi.<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted that al-Athari and al-Shankiti referred to verses taken from Islamic law that were published on the Salafi-jihadist Web portal, Minbar Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad. The Web portal was established by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, serves as a central platform for religious rulings on issues of jihad and is considered an authority by many mujahideen. In

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<sup>3</sup> August 1, 2013. <http://www.tawhed.ws/dl?i=05081301> (The Islamic ruling was omitted from the site); August 3, 2013. <http://alplatformmedia.com/vb>

<sup>4</sup> December 13, 2013. <http://alplatformmedia.com/vb>

<sup>5</sup> January 8, 2014. <http://alplatformmedia.com/vb>

addition, al-Athari himself serves as a commander of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham in Aleppo Province. As of September 2013, the Web portal stopped publishing religious rulings, most likely due to differences of opinion between the three above-mentioned clerics, and al-Maqdisi and his supporters.

### **Al-Maqdisi's Response**

The arbitrary behavior displayed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham, and the support that the organization has received from several Salafi-jihadist clerics, acted as a thorn in the side of Sheikh al-Maqdisi. He hurled criticism at the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham back in November 2013 in response to al-Athari's support of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. However, it was an implied criticism in which Al-Maqdisi advised the mujahideen to act wisely and exercise discretion before swearing allegiance to al-Baghdadi. In addition, he harshly admonished al-Athari and other Salafi-jihadist clerics for not exercising discretion when making religious rulings about serious issues, which he said carried serious implications for the Muslim Nation. He emphasized that rulings such as al-Athari's threatened to create conflict among the mujahideen: "Al-Athari and his cronies do not need to be the reason that arguments arise among the people. The goal of shari'a is to unite the ranks, not to separate them".<sup>6</sup>

On January 14, 2014, Al-Jazeera published another missive by Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's that differed from his previous letter in its explicit and direct criticism of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham. The letter itself was addressed "to Muslims in general and to the mujahideen in the cities of Al-Sham in particular".

In the beginning of the letter, al-Maqdisi wrote: "Reports about the civil war in Al-Sham have reached the heart of the prison. We have invested great effort in ending the rift and the fragmentation [...]". He emphasized that "a religious ruling that permits fighting between Muslims is foolish and asinine. [Such a ruling] is not published by a cleric who is endowed with a strong religious character. [When it comes to] Muslim blood, one must display unwavering confidence in Allah". He noted that instead of concentrating efforts on fighting enemies of Islam, such as the Alawites in Syria, the mujahideen are fighting one another, which itself brings joy to the enemies of Islam.

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<sup>6</sup> *Al-Jazeera*, November 25, 2013. <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/84a822d8-0f92-4ed0-8225-972bccf35cdc>

Al-Maqdisi went on to attack the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham and accused it of bearing responsibility for the rift among the ranks of mujahideen. "I reproach the [Islamic] State [of Iraq and Sham]. If we are unable to cooperate with factions that carry the banner of Allah's exclusiveness for the sake of which we are fighting, and if we are all divided when it comes to the details, how will we be able to engage Christian Syrians and other ethnic groups?"

Al-Maqdisi also harshly criticized several members of the jihadist Web portal, Minbar Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, including Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti, for publishing religious edicts that called for allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In his words: "Regarding the religious rulings that were published on the [Web portal], Minbar Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, I want the mujahideen to know that I am very angry and saddened by the religious rulings and announcements that were published on the Web site, which do not benefit the jihad being waged in Al-Sham and which favor a [certain] group over another [group]. [Such rulings and announcements] essentially condone the killing of Muslims and the incitement calling [on Muslims] to defy authority figures, particularly Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri". Al-Maqdisi emphasized that he was "very angry about what al-Athari and al-Shinqiti wrote. I want them to know just how angry I am at them. I never expected that these types of religious edicts would be published, no matter what the justification, especially those that permit the killing of anyone who does not swear allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham, as well as edicts that require Muslims to swear allegiance to al-Baghdadi, an oath of allegiance to the Great Emirate".<sup>7</sup>

A similar criticism to the one expressed by al-Maqdisi was also voiced by Abu Qatada al-Filistini, who was considered to have been Osama bin Laden's right-hand man in Europe. Today, al-Filistini is being tried in Jordan after England extradited him on charges of involvement in terrorism. Al-Filistini plead with his supporters back in November 2013 to show caution and discretion in anything concerning al-Baghdadi's announcement, and he expressed reservations over al-Baghdadi being crowned Emir of the Muslims. On January 16, 2014, he asked the media that was present at his trial to send a personal message to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi that he should change the name of his organization back to the previous one and operate under the banner of the Al-Nusra Front in Syria. In addition, he demanded that he stop warring with the other Islamist factions.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Al-Jazeera*, January 14, 2014. <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/5ac99a8a-d14a-4ed0-8425-32c3970c1e49>

<sup>8</sup> *Al-Hayat*, January 16, 2014. <http://alhayat.com/Details/593470>

## Conclusion

The publication of al-Maqdisi's letter is a clear indication of al-Zawahiri's loss of control and helplessness in imposing his authority on the mujahideen in Syria, in light of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham's unwillingness to obey external dictates as to how it should act, with the support of Salafi-jihadist clerics. The fact that al-Maqdisi intervened in such a blunt and explicit manner in siding with al-Zawahiri indicates his great concern over these developments.

In other words, al-Maqdisi's main interest is the unification of the ranks under al-Zawahiri's command and an end to the fragmentation and emergence of local, independent authority figures, such as al-Baghdadi. In addition, there is an obvious clash between the two approaches or strategies. While al-Zawahiri's approach is to sanctify war against the distant enemy – the United States and its allies, al-Baghdadi's approach is to follow the legacy of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (1966-2006), the former leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, who sanctified war against the Shi'ite populations supported by Iran.

The split between the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham can also explain the possible rift among members of the Salafi-jihadist movement in Jordan. As we have seen, al-Athari and al-Shinqiti, who stood out as prominent adjudicators on al-Maqdisi's Salafi-jihadist Web portal, Minbar Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, preferred to side with al-Baghdadi. Al-Maqdisi disagreed with them on this matter and expressed support for the policies of al-Zawahiri. Nevertheless, it is clear to the various groups of jihad fighters that the continuation of this rivalry is liable to severely damage the efforts of the mujahideen in their battle in Syria. Therefore, there have been considerable attempts made to mediate between the two warring camps, as was seen when a Salafi-jihadist delegation was sent from Jordan to Syria in mid-January 2014 in order to resolve the conflict.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Al-Hayat*, January 16, 2014. <http://alhayat.com/Details/594057>