



Initial Insights Following the Elimination of Ibrahim al-Quraishi

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Summary

On 3 February 2022, the US president announced that the US has killed Ibrahim al-Quraishi, ISIS leader. The operation was executed by US special forces in Idlib in northwestern Syria. This elimination provides the Biden administration with an impressive achievement in the war on terror and bolsters his stature, especially in light of the approaching mid-term elections. The elimination also dealt a major blow to ISIS' members' morale as their "caliphate" is caliph-less. With that said, the elimination raises a few questions, the first of which pertains to al-Quraishi's hideout in Idlib.

Key words: ISIS, Idlib, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Turkey

Idlib as an ISIS Theater?

Both al-Quraishi and his predecessor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, were killed in Idlib, some 10 Km from one another. Their preference to hide in the Idlib region is interesting as well as puzzling due to the unique dynamic of the region.

The Idlib region is considered a Syrian rebel enclave. **Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)**, led by Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Julani, is the largest rebel organization in the region. HTS was originally formed as the Syrian extension of “ISIS in Iraq” led (at the time by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, however due to difference of opinions, al-Julani disengaged from ISIS and pledged his allegiance to al-Qaeda. That too didn’t last and HTS disengaged from al-Qaeda claiming that would help in expanding the popular support and facilitate cooperation with other rebel factions that rejected an al-Qaeda affiliation. As mentioned above, these days HTS is an independent organization and a prominent actor in Idlib.

HTS’ main power base is Turkey that supports it with financial and humanitarian support for the residents of Idlib and by posting Turkish troops on the borders of the region to deter a possible Assad, Hezbollah, and Shite militias attacks. The Turkish support is rooted in its geopolitical interests, first and foremost its desire to become a regional influencing power. HTS, whose existence depends on Turkey’s goodwill complies with Turkish demands to arrest and deport foreign jihadists from Idlib, such Huras al-Din (al-Qaeda’s Syrian extension) activists.

HTS’ efforts to govern the entire Idlib region include setting roadblocks and checkpoints and establishing institutions to provide services to the approx. 2 million civilians. That said, the above heavy Turkish involvement raises questions regarding the ability of two ISIS leaders to hide in the region, especially in light of the fact that al-Quraishi hid in Etma, a village located only a few hundred meters from an HTS military post.

The above can be regarded as follows:

1. HTS provided information on al-Quraishi’s whereabouts, likely to Turkey, to reinforce its relationship with the Turkish regime and raise its profile to the international community, especially the US, as an organization that has only has nationalist goals in terms of toppling Assad but rejects any terrorist elements in the region. In this context **Abu Maria al-Kahtani**, a senior member of HTS’ Shura council

denied the above and said that HTS was not sorry for the al-Quraishi elimination or killing any other ISIS member due to their extreme ideology that only hurts the Islamic nation.

2. HTS was aware that al-Quraishi hid in Etma but preferred to turn a blind eye, maybe even due to a Turkish pressure. Therefore, it is possible that the information was provided to the US by the Democratic Syrian Forces, a Kurdish military organization operating in northeastern Syria. If that assessment is current that means that the Turkish intelligence maintains its ties with ISIS as it did as onset of the latter's wave of conquests in Iraq and Syria in 2014.

Another issue worthy of note is the connection between ISIS and Huras al-Din, al-Qaeda's Syrian extension. On the face of it the two organizations are hostile to one another on the background of their rhetoric however it was the latter that provided Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi refuge in Idlib. Therefore, it may be possible that al-Quraishi enjoyed the same hospitality.

Al-Quraishi's hiding in Idlib may point to a concern at ISIS' leadership level of hiding in Iraq, its main operations theater, due to successful counter-terrorist activity led by the US and the Iraqi regime. Choosing Idlib as a hideout also points to a preference to rely on the local smuggling networks to obtain financing, weapons, and personnel from Turkey. A prevailing assessment among intelligence agencies is that al-Quraishi arrived at Idlib and stayed there for a few good months to oversee his men's break into the prison northeastern Syria to free 3,000 ISIS operatives.

The Ramification of the Elimination

Al-Quraishi's killing somewhat clouds the propaganda achievement gained by ISIS when it broke into the prison in northern Syria a few days before the killing, but it seems that the killing won't have a significant effect on the organization in light of its decentralized nature. ISIS has demonstrated remarkable recovery capabilities after senior leaders' killings. For example, a week after al-Baghdadi's killing, al-Quraishi was appointed as the organization's leader.

Apparently the al-Quraishi killing will lead to power struggle and competition among ISIS' various provinces. For now, the following emerge as likely candidates for leadership:

- **Jumah Awad al-Bari** – head of the Shura council and al-Baghdadi's brother.

- **Abu Safaa al-Rif'ai** – one of ISIS three original founders. A senior military leader and a former officer in the Iraqi military during Saddam Hussein's reign.

Under al-Quraishi's leadership ISIS manage to regroup, wage a sophisticated guerilla war against its enemies and penetrate more operation theaters (e.g., Mozambique) as well run a well-oiled propaganda campaign despite the reduction in the amount of content it posted and al-Quraishi's avoidance of media appearance' likely for fear for his life. The notable campaigns during his tenure were those on the importance of waging a guerilla war [*Harb al-Istinzaf*] and the efforts to free ISIS prisoners from enemy prisons (the wall wrecking campaign [*Hadm al-Aswar*]). On this note, the latest bold operation led by al-Quraishi was an ISIS attack on the al-Hasaka prison for 10 days wherein the many of the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces troops were killed and provided ISIS with an impressive propaganda win.

Thus far there has been no official response to al-Quraishi's killing. The official ISIS provinces continue to update on their activities against their enemies and the prevalent discourse among the operatives revolves around the break into the al-Hasaka prison. It may very well be that ISIS in internalizing the ramifications of the al-Quraishi killing and debates who his successor will be. Regardless of who the new leader will be, it is clear that he will have a significant impact on the organizational structure, strategy, war tactics, propaganda and the inter province dynamics.