



# DEATH OF ABU MOHAMMAD AL ADNANI: HOW DOES IT AUGUR FOR THE IS?

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The end of August marked great success for the coalition forces fighting the Islamic State (IS), as on August 30, 2016, the news of the death of Abu Mohammad al Adnani was released by various IS held media groups. The 40 year old ideologue and terrorist leader was one of the oldest serving members of the IS, and was the second-in-command of the group headed by the self-anointed Caliph, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.

Adnani was born in Western Syria, and became active with Islamist militancy sometime in the year 2000. Unlike other major terrorist leaders, he was not a veteran of Afghanistan, and rose under the mentorship of Abu Anas al Shami, the Islamist cleric who was an active member of the *Jama'at al Tawhid wal Jihad* – the organisation that later rebranded itself as al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

*Jama'at* was started by Abu Musab al Zarqawi, after his brief stint in Afghanistan, where he participated in the *Jihad* against the

Soviets. In the wake of the American led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Zarqawi and his organisation was able to exploit the grievances of the Sunni Iraqis to establish his organisation as a formidable force to reckon with. He unleashed a reign of terror that was marked by a previously unforeseen level of brutality and violence. *Jama'at* (and later the AQI) executed its victims and opponents publicly to draw attention to their cause. Such gory tactics drew criticisms even from the al Qaeda core, which was worried that public beheadings and mass shootings might push potential supporters away. However these methods helped the group in drawing out support from a section of the youth that romanticised the idea of violence. This marked the birth of a new breed of terrorists – such as Baghdadi and Adnani – who had not grown under the tutelage of Osama bin Laden or Abdallah Azzam<sup>1</sup>, but were inspired by their ideologies, and were passionately driven by what Zarqawi was propounding.

Adnani's jihadist career grew under the leadership of people whose idea of waging a religious war was wrought in brutality and bloodshed. When Zarqawi was killed in an American airstrike in 2006, Baghdadi took over the organisation, and Adnani was promoted to become his deputy. Together, they pushed the AQI to greater notoriety. As the deputy head, and the chief publicist, Adnani used Zarqawi's violent methods to publicise IS' activities. It was under his guidance that the IS released the execution videos of its prisoners. The videos proved to be a great propaganda tool for the group, as it helped in both – striking terror in the heart of the general populace; and drawing recruits who were attracted by the violent strategy.

With the increasing role of the AQI in the Iraqi and Syrian Crisis, the group decided to change its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to demonstrate its growing influence in the region and to act beyond the brand of al Qaeda. ISIS could act with greater autonomy compared to the other al Qaeda offshoots because it had direct influence on the field and hence it could garner support from the populace much better than the leaders of al Qaeda core, who were issuing orders from their havens in Afghanistan. The death of Osama bin Laden further crippled al Qaeda. Ever since Zawahiri took over the group, there has been no major attack orchestrated by al Qaeda or its core leadership. Bin Laden had become an image that was synonymous with al Qaeda, and his death

created a void that could not be filled by Zawahiri, who was seen as a more soft-spoken leader. This void was exploited by the ISIS to grow and on July 29, 2014, ISIS renamed itself as the Islamic State implying that its ambitions were now global, and not limited to just Iraq and Syria, and in doing so the IS completely separated from the al Qaeda network.

Adnani served as the spokesperson for the IS, and was the voice behind its call to terror, inspiring supporters from around the globe to attack the group's many enemies wherever and however possible. In May 2014, he publicly made a call for defection, asking all of al Qaeda's branches to issue statements about its approach towards jihad. This was IS' way of reaching out to the other terrorist groups asking them to break out of their al Qaeda ranks and come under the banners of the IS. The message was received with great enthusiasm as many terrorist factions were dissatisfied in the manner in which al Qaeda was acting and it helped the IS to build support base in different parts of the world. When IS was at its peak in 2014, Adnani congratulated the cadres, but urged them to not become over-confident. When the group suffered major losses due to the air and ground strikes, he put up a brave face, encouraging the fighters to carry on and not lose hope.<sup>2</sup> His messages kept the group going in times of distress and success alike.

As the head of external operations, Adnani was responsible for the dual-natured threat of

the IS, planning direct attacks and inspiring lone wolf attacks. He helped plan and execute the November 2015 Paris attacks, which killed 137 people and wounded more than 300. In September 2014, Adnani sent a recorded message urging for attacks in the West, exhorting supporters to attack with knives or cars if possible. This call to terror, and the weaponisation of everyday life and instruments, has been answered in cities across the world. As per the report by the Soufan Group, Adnani's contribution made detection and disruption much harder while still increasing casualty counts—one of his most significant and lasting impacts.<sup>3</sup> The truck rampage in Nice in July 2016 is a perfect example of Adnani's influence as it involved nothing more than a truck, and yet it killed 86 people. His call for individual attacks by any means potentially inspired numerous plots in 2016, including the Orlando shooting in June, two attacks in the German region of Bavaria in July; and the murder of a police chief and a Catholic priest in France in two months respectively.<sup>4</sup>

With Adnani's death, IS is left with a significant void. As one of the oldest members of the group, he was the heart of the organisation. A master in the use of social media, he was able to provide the IS with a reach that the al Qaeda could not have even thought of. Adnani became the voice and the face of the group though his audio and video messages promoting the IS ideology and ensuring that the group's voice

reached far corners of the world. His death marks the end of one of the most thriving terrorists in the world, whose actions unleashed massive suffering and destruction.

Terrorist groups are often seen as leader-centric organisations, and eliminating the senior echelon can lead to collapse of a group. However, such voids are often also replaced by even more radical leaders as members from the lower rung of the group are pushed up to take charge, affecting the way the group behaves. This was seen in case of al Qaeda, where the death of Laden created a void in which the IS grew. Although it is a serious blow to the group, IS is known for its intricately planned organisational structure, and hence it is highly unlikely that Adnani's death could be interpreted as the end of the IS as some reports in the media have claimed. It however does mark the removal of one of the most dangerous faces of Islamist terror in the world.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Abdallah Azzam was one of the master architects of the *Mujahideen* uprising against the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan (1979-89). Together with Bin Laden, he helped in creating a worldwide network that supported his extremist Islamist ideas – one that matured into al Qaeda and its global network.

<sup>2</sup>Patrick Cockburn, "The killing of Abu Mohammed al-Adnani is a major blow for Isis, but the terror group was already badly battered", *Independent*, 1 September 2016, see <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/abu->

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<sup>3</sup> TSG IntelBriefs, “The Islamic State Loses Its Loudest Voice”, The Soufan Group 31 August 2016, see <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-islamic-state-loses-its-loudest-voice/>

<sup>4</sup> Jack Moore, “Does the death of Abu Mohammad al-Adnani spell the end for”, Newsweek, 31 August 2016, see <http://www.newsweek.com/does-death-abu-mohammad-al-adnani-spell-end-isis-494739>

