Interview with Ahmed Al-Hamdan

by Tore Hamming

Part 2

(The future approach of al-Qaeda)

Translated by Al Muwahideen Media

**Interviewer:** In July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra broke away from AQ and established Jabhat Fatah ash-Shaam with the blessing of the senior AQ leadership. In his most recent speech (Brief Messages to a Supported Ummah 4) Zawahiri furthermore encouraged Jihadi factions in Iraq to unify and fight IS and Iran. Is the approach of a popular front not necessarily with allegiance to AQ, but simply being sympathetic to the movement, becoming the future for AQ?

**Ahmed Al Hamdan:** There is a mistake in the question, as al Zawahiri did not seek the factions in Iraq to unite to fight the Islamic state, not in episode 4 nor in any part of the series.

Secondly: we must understand that wars and battles are magnets which attract Jihadi thinkers and I do not think that you would find a battle front or any popular movement whose people are not sons of the Jihadi movement. And we must understand that al Qaeda do not look to the matter from the perspective of upholding its name and achieving its organisational goals and if that was indeed the case, then they would not have accepted the breaking of ties with al Nusra for the benefit of the Muslims in Syria.

Generally, al Qaeda feel that its presence in some of the fields is a hindrance and that it is used as a justification by the enemies to give a pretext for international forces to intervene. And we believe that the West does not just have a problem with what it calls terrorism, rather it has a problem with any Islamic project. When it is announced that Al Qaeda is present in any geographical area you cannot be certain of this claim. However when the West have no other excuse to intervene and suppress the Islamic projects then it will enter and strike the Islamic groups when this claim (of an al Qaeda presence) can be reasonably verified.
And al Qaeda do not like to announce their presence in some areas for a number of reasons:

1. To expose the Western enemies hostility to every Islamic project and show that their problem is with Islam and the establishment of the Shariah and not with a specific group, and to remove the usual argument used by the Western countries for intervention.

2. To find more room to manoeuvre, and to create places to move financial support and aid - meaning you will not find some traders in some of the states because there is a difficulty finding support in needy States in which battles and war are taking place. Likewise you will not find some of the independent support, that is that it will be difficult to assist you or support the Jihadi groups in a region in which you are fighting, due to fear of being described with or connected with terrorism.[1]

3. Stopping the Western countries from being able to cause provocation between the factions as some of the factions will accuse a specific group because of its alleged affiliation to al Qaeda. The world has mobilised against us and that is the reason for the complexity of our cause, and there is problems and enmity between groups, and the enemy benefits from this from the beginning and so Al Qaeda does not reveal itself.

These matters are not my own conclusions, rather they have been mentioned by Al Qaeda leaders themselves and those close to them. For example:

Shaykh Ayman al Zawahiri said "the guidance from the general command was that we do not publicly announce the presence of Al Qaeda in Syria and this matter was agreed even with our brothers in Iraq and so we were surprised by the announcement which has provided the Syrian regime and the Americans a chance which they hoped for, then this will cause the normal people of Syria to ask: what is with this al Qaeda that they have brought disaster upon us? Is Bashar not enough? Do you want to bring the Americans upon us also?"[2]

Shaykh Abu Yahya al Libi said in his letter to Majeed al Majeed, the leader of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades about the beginning of armed actions in Syria: "I have written about that to the brothers in the Islamic State more than a few times regarding some outlines and to summarise the points which were made: there is not to be any public appearance there under the name of any Jihadi group, especially those which are famous and well known"[3]

And the leadership of al Qaeda in the Islamic Magrib said in "The Azwad Document" after taking control of the northern part of Mali: "And the third benefit: lies in mitigating upon ourselves external and international pressure and it is extremely important that we look at our Islamic project in Azwad as one that begins small and in front of it there are many stages which it must pass through to be able to mature and become strong. And presently it is still in its early days crawling on its knees and it has not yet stood upon its feet. So is it wise to begin now by loading it down with weights which will totally transform it before it stands upon its feet, in fact this may lead to choking and preventing its breath. If we really want it to stand upon its feet in this world full of enemies and predators then we must make things easy on it and take its hand and help it to stand. So based upon this view we adopt the understanding of neutralizing opponents and avoiding provocation, hostility and the policy of agitating the enemies"[4]

So I think that adopting this policy was why the al Qaeda branch which was ruling took the name Ansar ad Deen instead of Al Qaeda so as to avoid provocation and antagonizing and irritating the enemies. And in fact the absence of the name al Qaeda allowed many preachers to issue
statements in condemnation of the French invasion of Mali without the difficulty of this being used to link them to Al Qaeda. And so you are able to get people supporting al Qaeda without them knowing, or else they know and there is nothing to prevent them.

And in the first Abbottabad Papers, Shaykh Usamah bin Ladin advised Al Shabab al Mujahideen to conceal their connection to Al Qaeda and he stated the reason and said: "it will increase the vigilance of the opponents against you if the issue is public, as happened with the brothers in Iraq and Algeria. And the second matter: some of the Muslims in Somalia are suffering from extreme poverty and malnutrition as a result of the ongoing war in their country and so I would urge you to listen to one of my speeches in the gulf states on effective and important development projects which are not expensive and which we previously tested in Sudan. So if the Mujahideen do not appear publicly to be united with Al Qaeda then this will strengthen the position of businessmen who want to help their brothers in Somalia and bring success to these projects to relieve hardship from the dispersed Muslims in Somalia and ensure the survival of the people amongst including the Mujahideen"[5]

As for the future of Al Qaeda and that which al Qaeda wants? Do they want to control and subject everyone to them? Or do they want to be part of any new Islamic government through mutual consent with other groups?

The foundational strategy of Al Qaeda is not to establish an Islamic state in the presence of a strong cohesive international system and in the first Abbottabad papers Shaykh Usamah bin Ladin spoke a lot about this strategy and here is some of his words: "we must keep in mind at this time that organised work to establish a Muslim state begins by exhausting global disbelief as it has a strong hostility towards the establishment of any Islamic Emirate and what indicates the heightened hostility of the West to an Islamic emirate of any size is was the emirate of Shaykh al Khataabi which he established in Morocco before draining the crusaders to the point that they could not dominate the Muslim lands so the crusaders increased their power and surrounded the emirate in order to strike it. The head of global disbelief today has a large influence upon the countries of the region, it is their lifeblood and supporting base and has the power which enabled it to defeat Saddam and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, even though it was significantly weakened. Yet it still has the power to defeat the government of any true Islamic state in the region at this present time and so it is necessary to continue to drain and exhaust it, to the point where it is weak and is not able to defeat any state which is established. Then you must take into account the need to unite all the efforts and energies of the Muslims who refrained from jihad either with an excuse or without and then the establishing of a Muslim state is begun with the permission of Allah, and if needed the matter is delayed for a few years.”[6]

However despite that it does not oppose the establishment of an Islamic state by other groups before such a time, but its own outlook and strategy is one of not establishing an Islamic state before the weakening or fall of the international system. For example al Qaeda did not reject the state of the Taliban and did not say we are against it because of the presence of the international community. On the contrary it supported this Muslim country even though it opposed its strategy about the creation of states.

Returning to the future of al Qaeda, does it want a state which exploits any popular movement and will use that popular movement in its interests? The answer is no. Al Qaeda do not see this as a
successful method for a number of reasons, such as:

1. Al Qaeda believe that any state which is established alone will not last long and will soon fall due to the enemies ability to defeat it - as we will mention soon - and this failure would lead to alienation the people and they would not help it again later. And this has been their outlook throughout the contemporary period. Abu Bashir al Wuhaishi sent a letter to Shayk Usamah saying that the group in Yemen had the ability to enter Saana and take control of it and Shaykh Usamah replied to him "regarding what you have said about now being the time to enter Saana; we would like to establish Islamic law in it if we were capable of maintaining that, however while the main enemy has been weakened economically and militarily both before 9/11 and after it, it still has the ability to destroy any state which is established and so we don't want to put ourselves and our families in Yemen in that situation at this time, before first preparing the conditions. And if we did that then we would be like the one who built a house in front of the torrent and if the river flowed through it then it would knock it down and then if we again wanted to rebuild the house a second time we would have alienated the people and they would not help us again".[7].

2. They do not have the ability to manage everything on their own and based on that Shaykh Abu Yahya al Libi said to Abu Hamza al Muhajir "know my beloved brother that the success of establishing a state cannot be achieved by your efforts alone no matter what you think about your adequacy and efficiency. And the matter is more great and serious so that it needs more than your efforts alone and its fronts are numerous and varied so include your brothers - who you know- within it, and there is no other way to do so except by your serious efforts in that. So make them a cornerstone in your project and included within its directives"[8]

3. Your involvement of the other groups along with you in the management of the new state means the dispersion of the ranks of your enemy and so they will not be able to unite in the same way that they would be able to if you alone are in control.

4. Not to alienate other parties by excluding them as then they will turn on you or help the enemy. By allowing them to participate you then win them to your ranks. You will find that all of this is found in the speeches of the leaders of Al Qaeda, for example what was said by Shaykh Atiyatullah al Libi to Shaykh Abu Musab al Zarqawi:

“Therefore, you, as a leader and a jihadist political organization who wants to destroy a power and a state and erect on its rubble an Islamic state, or at least form the building block on the right path towards that, need all of these people; and it is imperative for someone like this to get along with everyone in various degrees as well, for the brothers are of varying calibres, in my opinion. You also have the tribal leaders and the likes from the upper echelons of society, and they are of different levels as well, so the good among them who is close to us, we should consult them in some of our matters and give them value and give them some praise and involve them in some matters and vest them with some things because they love prestige. In this way we should try not to cause them to believe that we are going over their heads or infringing upon them in political and social leadership, or that we are overstepping them and not considering them and not giving them value and not taking them into account. Rather, we should make them feel that we want to work with them to establish the religion, liberate the country and the people, establish the Islamic state and the rule of the Shariah of the most merciful etc. and that, in our opinion, they have a large role to play, as we need every Muslim and every person
to play a part in this. In the meantime, we should call them to commit to the Shariah and to all that is best and of merit, and we should advise them against what is wrong and from all bad deeds, and we should try to perfect them and encourage them. Whenever the people feel that we value them and appreciate their efforts and that we respect them and want the best for them and that we sympathize with them, this is what will draw their hearts to us."

And Shaykh Ayman al Zawahiri also said to Al Zarqawi: "The Americans will exit soon, God willing, and the establishment of a governing authority-as soon as the country is freed from the Americans-is not dependant on force alone. Indeed, it's imperative that, in addition to force, there be an appeasement of Muslims and a sharing with them in governance and in the Shura council and in enjoining what is good and prohibiting what is evil. In my view-which I continue to reiterate is limited and has a distant perspective upon the events-this must be achieved through the people of the Shura and who possess authority to determine issues and make them binding, and who are endowed with the qualifications for carrying them out. They would be elected by the people of the country to represent them and overlook the work of the authorities in accordance with the rules of the glorious Sharia. And it doesn't appear that the Mujahedeen, much less the al Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers (Iraq), will lay claim to governance without the Iraqi people. Not to mention that that would be in contravention of the Shura methodology. That is not practical in my opinion."

And from the practical examples of this on the ground is the participation of the civilians from the people of Hadramaut in the local council to administer their area when al Qaeda in Yemen had control of that city.

And the leader of Al Qaeda, Khalid Batarfi said in an interview with the editor and chief of the Mukalla daily, Sand Baysob, in January 2015 when he was asked does the council in Hadramaut follow you. He answered:

"Your view about this people’s council is wrong. This council meets itself and it consists of scholars of the city and its surroundings and we do not get involved in the formation of this council nor in choosing its members. All the people know the members from whom the council is chosen and they are from the scholars of the city and its surroundings. It is not a front for us as you have stated in the question, rather it is a separate entity which contributes to the management of the city and we have agreed with them on three basic items to work for:

- That the reference is the Book and the Sunnah
- That the council is to administer the people
- That the council does not have links to any party or with any internal or external agenda

And we were ready and still are ready to hand over all the city headquarters which the council needs for the administration of the city, however the council needed more time to arrange its paperwork and find enough strength to protect these facilities. So we began to surrender them gradually as requested and any delay was due to them and not to ourselves. We consider the involvement of the people of a land in the management of their land as a religious duty and it is included within the issue of consultation and so we will not dictate general matters of the nation and we will not give ourselves the right to
determine such matters alone."

And another example of that is the cooperation between Ansar ad Deen in Mali and the Azwad National liberation movement in their joint management to rule by the Shariah in the northern region of Mali and al Qaeda never considered ruling alone.[11]

And in summary: what is the situation or the future which al Qaeda want?

It is that there is an Islamic Caliphate established by election, consultation and the satisfaction of the people.

And it is not that al Qaeda imposes itself upon everyone else.

And the benefit for which al Qaeda works is not that of any group or a party, rather the benefit of the Islamic nation is placed before every other benefit, even if that is the benefit of the group itself. Based on that Shaykh Usama bin Ladin, May Allah have mercy upon him, said:

“The benefit of the group comes before the benefit of the individual and the benefit of the state comes before the benefit of the group and the benefit of the nation comes before the benefit of the state.”[12]

And based upon that benefit or end, it is necessary to participate alongside others and allow the nation to choose its ruler, not to impose yourself, as Shaykh Usamah bin Ladin said:

“And we Muslims believe that it is the right of the nation to choose its own leader and we believe in consultation.”[13]

And Dr Ayman al Zawahiri said:

“And so we say clearly to our Muslim nation in general and our people in Syria specifically, that al Qaeda will never rob you of your right to choose the Muslim ruler whom you are pleased with, as established by the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of his prophet peace be upon him. And if Allah enables the ruling of Islam in Syria soon with his permission and if the Ummah chooses a ruler who establishes the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of His prophet peace be upon him, then he is also our choice. Then after that we want all the Muslim Ummah to agree upon one Khalifah whom they are pleased with.”[14]

He also said:

“We have stated time and time again that if the people of Syria set up an Islamic government and chose for themselves a leader, then their choice is our choice, because we, by the grace of Allah, do not seek power, rather we seek the rule of the Shariah and we don't want to rule the Muslims but we want like the Muslims to be ruled by Islam. We have never stopped calling for the unity of the Mujahideen in Syria and their uniting upon the establishing of a guided Islamic Mujahid government which spreads justice and seeks consultation, which returns the rights and aids the weak and which upholds jihad and frees the lands, which strives to free Al Aqsa and revive the Khilafah upon the Prophetic methodology. And there will be no organizational affiliation in these great days - with the permission of Allah- which the Nation hopes for, the nation of which we are a part of, not guardians of.”[15]
Moreover, the outlook of al Qaeda is to appoint a ruler who is subject to a consultational council, i.e. not an absolute ruler.

And Shaykh Usama bin Ladin said about that:

“The right in choosing a leader belongs to the Nation and it has a right to hold him to account if he deviates and the right to remove him if he does something which necessitates that.”[16]

And as for the future which al Qaeda hopes for itself: it is that it disappears and ceases to exist along with the rest of the Islamic group when an Islamic state is established.

Footnotes:

[1] For example the two Kuwaiti Shaykhs who are both Mujahideen veterans issued a statement on the 14th of March 2016 seeking in it the breaking of ties between Jabhat al Nusra and Al Qaeda and they gave reasons saying: "The benefit of a merge between Jabhat al Nusra and other factions, many who are qualified to so so and have the right to. Also to transform the Jihad from the Jihad of a group to th Jihad of an Ummah and to create freedom of movement for Jihadi supporters as the name Al Qaeda as a bogeyman enables the hypocrites chase them and harass them"


[5] The collected messages and directives of Shaykh Usamah bin Ladin, P.731, 6th August 2010

[6] The collected messages and directives of Shaykh Usamah bin Ladin, P.767

[7] The first Abbottabad documents, index number: SOCOM-2012-0000016

[8] Letter to Shaykh Abu Hamza al Muhajir P.3

[9] Complete works of Shaykh Atiyatullah al Libi P.1791

[10] Letter to Abu Musab al Zarqawi P.9

[11] For the full terms of the joint agreement refer to the official statement released by Al Qaeda in the Magrib entitled "A media message and invitation" Dated Wednesday 3rd Rajib 1436 / April 22nd 2015 by Al Andalus Foundation.

[12] The collected messages and directives of Shaykh Usamah bin Ladin, P.735

[13] The collected messages and directives of Shaykh Usamah bin Ladin, P.685

[14] "Belief cuts down arrogance" by As Sahab Foundation, August 2013

Appendix: notes about the comments of Tore Hamming regarding the first answer:

The release “Remaining in Iraq and Sham” by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi had been previously published by the Islamic State independently, and it is capable of spreading its material quickly and directly. And this is different to the one who has committed himself to method of publishing specifically through Al Fajr Centre. So if this person wants to change his policy it will take him a long time to search for alternative means and he must increase his security before replacing the method of publication. Those who sympathised with the State within Al Fajr Centre took advantage of the fact that the centre was the only source for spreading the material of Al Qaeda to delay or even prevent the arrival of communications between the different branches of Al Qaeda concerning the matter of the Islamic State. And I will give some examples:

The brother Abu Umar al Najdi is a Mujahid from Yemen who wrote under the name “The loyal companion” on twitter and was recommended by the other Mujahideen from Yemen who were present on twitter, for example “Mohamed al Malaki” who is one of the Mujahideen who had previously been in Afghanistan and then went to Yemen. This person published a confidential letter which had been sent from a veteran leader of Al Qaeda who was present in Syria i.e. Muhsin Al Fadli, to the leader of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. He said in it:

[Attached with this letter is the letter of Shaykh Abu Khalid al Suri, may Allah accept him, which he sent to Dr. Ayman during the first day of the Fitna, also the statements and the claims of both Al Nusra and The State [IS] which I have previously sent to Dr. Ayman, may Allah protect him, and the audio message of Al Jawlani clarifying the causes of the problem and also the audio witness testimony of (…..) and Abu Azeez al Qatari. And for your information I have sent it to you again despite having sent it before through (…..) who is the representative of the leader of Al Fajr Centre – I sent it to you again to make sure that it would reach you].

Abu Umar al Najdi said, commenting in the margin of this letter about the text:

The attachments and testimonies which the writer of the letter sent at the beginning of the Fitna of the State by way of Al Fajr Centre, never arrived to Shaykh Abu Baseer [Wuhayshi] and only arrived with this letter. And he warned everyone to be careful in dealing with Al Fajr Centre and there are suspicious and frightening dealings which did not come from new members, rather from the senior members within the centre. And Allahs refuge is sought.

This explains why the branch in Yemen stopped publishing articles through al Fajr Centre and instead began publishing through their own representative “Abdullah Mujahid”

So, if the Islamic State had not been able to publish their material in any way other than through Al Fajr Centre and despite that the Centre did not publish their material, then at that time we would be able to have doubt and ask if it was true that those people were really sympathetic to the State?

Interestingly, my opinion matches his opinion regarding the reason why fighters went over into the ranks of the Islamic State. And look what this leader said to Abu Baseer:

[Now the third generation of the Mujahideen are influenced by the thinking of the State and this is
due to a number of reasons, including the strength of the State media, another reason being the silence of the leaders of Al Qaeda and the absence of clarifying the methodological mistakes of the State, making the youth of the Nation go to them and here the Nation has lost out by the silence of the Jihadi movement about these errors. And may Allah reward you with good for publishing the statement of Shaykh Harith al Nadhari as it clarified and made plain many rulings, however while we have now spoken of the reality, it has unfortunately come too late. And why did you not previously speak out and clarify the ruling about the fake Khilafah of Al Baghdadi. This is necessary for us to restore the confidence of the rational, confident and self-assured youth of the Ummah in Al Qaeda, so don’t postpone the speech beyond its time in order to take a neutral position as this policy is no longer going to work in the face of the behaviour and folly of the state].

Translated by : Al Muwahideen Media

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