



## The killing of ISIS's leader in an operation by US forces in Syria and possible implications

February 8, 2022

### Overview

► **US President Joe Biden** announced that ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi was killed in an operation carried out by US Special Forces on the night of February 2-3, 2022, **in the village of Atmeh in the Idlib Province in northwestern Syria. CENTCOM Commander General Kenneth F. McKenzie** noted that ISIS's leader blew himself up at the start of the operation because he refused to surrender to the US forces and that he and members of his immediate family were killed in the explosion (US Department of Defense website, February 4, 2022).

► **ISIS's media has not yet issued an official announcement of his death. Amir Mohammed Abdul Rahman al-Mawla al-Salbi**, known as **Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi**, 46, was born to a Sunni Turkmen family in Tal Afar, near Mosul in Iraq. Al-Qurashi had a religious and military education. He studied Islamic law at the University of Mosul and served in the Iraqi army under Saddam Hussein. In 2003, with the US invasion of Iraq, he joined radical jihadi organizations operating in the country. In 2004, he was detained by the Americans and incarcerated in Camp Bucca in southern Iraq, where he apparently met Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. On his release from prison, he became a senior ISIS official, holding several positions in the organization. On October 26, 2019, after the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, he succeeded him as ISIS's leader. It should be noted that he was one of the very few senior ISIS officials who were not Arabs.

► As ISIS's leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi was able to partially rehabilitate the organization, which had lost control of most of the territories that it had controlled in Syria and Iraq and was at an unprecedented low. Personally, he took care to remain behind the scenes, unlike his predecessor, who considered himself an ideologist. He did not disseminate ideological religious audiotapes. Al-Qurashi was considered a skilled military man who commanded ISIS's operations on a regular basis from his place of residence. He was known for his cruelty when he took part in the killing of members of the Yazidi minority. He was apparently also

responsible for the break-in at Al-Sina'ah-Ghuwayran Prison in Al-Hasakah on January 20, 2022.

► **The death of ISIS's leader in the US operation represents a blow to ISIS's morale.** Past experience, however, indicates that killing the leader of the organization is a tactical event that does not result in the elimination of the organization or its ideology. **The death of Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi may have a temporary effect on ISIS's activity in Syria and Iraq, which were its focal points of control and activity.** However, it is unlikely to affect the more remote provinces where local groups operate. Although these groups have pledged allegiance to ISIS's leader, ISIS's control over them is limited. **It is possible that the death of ISIS's leader will increase its operatives' motivation to carry out attacks to avenge his death, including in the West and especially in the United States.**

► With regard to Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi's possible successor, there are a number of unofficial reports that the new leader is codenamed **Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi** (Twitter, February 6, 2022; ru-maf.net, February 6, 2022). It should be noted that after Al-Baghdadi's death on October 26, 2019, the name of his successor was revealed only in January 2020.

## The operation in which al-Qurashi was killed

► On February 3, 2022, **US President Joe Biden** announced that **ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi** was killed in an operation carried out by US Special Forces on the night of February 2-3, 2022, in the village of Atmeh in the Idlib Province in northwestern Syria. Apart from Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi, at least 12 other people were killed in the operation, including women and children from his immediate family. They were killed after al-Qurashi himself had detonated a powerful charge inside the house, completely destroying the top floor.

► Several hours later, President Biden gave a special speech detailing the course of the operation. According to the President, before the operation, he instructed the Department of Defense to take all the necessary precautions to minimize impact to civilians, knowing that Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi had surrounded himself with family members, including children. Thus, the operation was carried out by Special Forces rather than by an airstrike. According to President Biden, when the forces were about to capture him, al-Qurashi **himself blew up the entire third floor of the building where he was hiding along with his family**, as his predecessor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, did in a similar situation. President Biden made clear that all US soldiers had returned from the mission unscathed, and that all the civilians who were

killed died as a result of the explosion caused by Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi himself rather than from US gunfire (White House website, February 3, 2022).

- ▶ President Biden said Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi had been responsible for terrorist attacks against citizens of the United States, the US allies and partners, and against many civilians in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia. The President also mentioned ISIS's attack on the Al-Sina'ah-Ghuwayran Prison in Al-Hasakah, eastern Syria, on January 20, 2022. He also noted that al-Qurashi was the driving force behind the genocide of the Yazidi minority in northwestern Iraq in 2014 (White House website, February 4, 2022).
- ▶ According to several reports, during the raid, the US forces met with resistance on the part of armed ISIS operatives and the US troops returned fire. According to The New York Times and other media outlets, one of the helicopters developed mechanical problems and landed at an alternative site, where the forces decided to destroy it.
- ▶ The Iraqi authorities issued an official announcement that they were proud to note that **the Iraqi intelligence had provided the United States with precise intelligence** that led to the location and killing of Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi (Al-Jazeera, Al-Mayadeen, February 4, 2022).



The building where ISIS's leader lived (SyriaTV, February 3, 2022)

## Milestones in al-Qurashi's life<sup>1</sup>

- ▶ **Amir Mohammed Abdul Rahman al-Mawla al-Salbi**, codenamed Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurashi, Haji Abdullah, Abu Abdullah and Abdullah Qardash, was born in 1976 to a Sunni Turkmen family in Tal Afar, northern Iraq (about 70 km west of Mosul), a region predominantly

<sup>1</sup> For further details, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from January 30, 2020, "Profile of Haji Abdullah, who succeeded Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as ISIS's new leader"

populated by the Turkmen minority.<sup>2</sup> He studied sharia law (Islamic religious law) at the University of Mosul and served as a lieutenant-colonel in the Iraqi army during Saddam Hussein's regime and acquired military experience.



**Photos of Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi distributed by the US Department of State. Right: August 21, 2019. Left: October 28, 2019. The photos were taken in Camp Bucca, the American detention facility in southern Iraq.**

- ▶ In 2003, when US forces invaded Iraq, al-Qurashi joined radical jihadi organizations in Iraq. When the Al-Qaeda branch (which ISIS emerged from) established itself in Iraq, Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi was **its senior sharia authority**. **In 2004**, he was incarcerated by US forces in the Camp Bucca detention facility in southern Iraq, where he made the acquaintance of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the future leader of ISIS. The detention facility is probably where he adopted Salafist jihadi Islam. **After the establishment of ISIS, Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi enjoyed Al-Baghdadi's support and confidence, until he became one of ISIS's senior figures.**
- ▶ After Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed on October 26, 2019, the Shura Council, ISIS's supreme body, decided to appoint him as his successor (Al-Jazeera, February 3, 2022; The Guardian, January 20, 2020; Al-Hurra, October 27, 2019, and January 20, 2020; Al-Jazeera, October 28, 2019).
- ▶ Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi is reportedly responsible for several ISIS terrorist attacks abroad and played a major role in the killing and enslavement of the Yazidi minority, among other things

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<sup>2</sup> **The Turkmen are a nation and a Turkic ethnic and tribal group.** They originate from Central Asia (like the Turks). The Turkmen reached the countries of the Middle East – Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey – at least as long ago as the 11th century and preserved their language and culture while retaining their sectarian and tribal ties in these countries. **In Iraq, there is a relatively large minority comprising about 3,000,000. The town of Tal Afar, where Haji Abdullah was born, is the stronghold of the Turkmen in Iraq.** The Turkmen as an ethnic group do not have a special status in ISIS, but apart from Haji Abdullah, there were other senior figures of Iraqi Turkmen origin who were prominent among ISIS's leadership: one of them was an operative codenamed Abu **Bakr the Turkmen**, who was killed in an American airstrike in the Tal Afar area in Iraq (September 10, 2015); another ISIS operative of a Turkmen origin, also from Tal Afar, is **Arkan Abdul Rahman Hussein Mohammad**, who was detained by the SDF in the Euphrates Valley in Syria.

by justifying it based on religious law (The Guardian, January 20, 2020; Al-Hurra, October 27, 2019, and January 20, 2020; Al-Jazeera, October 28, 2019).

- ▶ Four experts from West Point's Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) who analyzed the reports of Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi's interrogation by the Americans from early 2008 until the end of that year described him as a rat. They noted that he had betrayed people, including ISIS operatives, disclosing their names and information on them to his captors.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ There are many **similarities between Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi's biography and that of Al-Baghdadi**: they are both Iraqi Sunnis (although Al-Baghdadi is of Arab origin while al-Qurashi is of Turkmen origin); they both studied Islamic religious law (sharia) at Iraqi universities (Al-Baghdadi earned a Ph.D.); they were both incarcerated by the US in Camp Bucca; they both fought against the American forces in Iraq and both fought in the ranks of ISIS since it was established.
- ▶ However, unlike his predecessor, who considered himself an ideologist and a religious leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi was mainly a military figure. Unlike his predecessor, he did not disseminate ideological religious audiotapes intended for ISIS supporters. He also had more extensive military experience, acquired while serving as a lieutenant-colonel in the Iraqi army during Saddam Hussein's regime, whereas al-Baghdadi acquired his military skills while fighting on the ground in the ranks of ISIS.

## The implications of al-Qurashi's death on ISIS

- ▶ The death of ISIS's leader in the US operation **represents a blow to ISIS's morale**, especially after the organization's operational success in the break-in at the Al-Sina'ah-Ghuwayran Prison in Al-Hasakah. **ISIS's media has still not issued any official notice on the death of its leader.**
- ▶ However, based on past experience, the killing of ISIS's leader is a tactical rather than a strategic achievement. It may lead to a temporary slowdown in ISIS's activity but will not eliminate the organization or its ideology. ISIS is a decentralized organization composed of

<sup>3</sup> According to an article covering the publication in question, Al-Mawla gave up 88 members and affiliates of ISIS while he was arrested. See Lauren Holtmeier, "How ISIS leader al-Mawla rose rapidly through the ranks in Iraqi terrorist group," Al Arabiya English, September 24, 2020. <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/09/24/How-ISIS-leader-al-Mawla-rose-rapidly-through-the-ranks-in-iraqi-terrorist-group>. See also <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8746865/ISIS-leader-intelligence-supergrass.html>

many independent groups and organizations operating throughout the world. These groups and organizations joined it based on a radical ideology which is not necessarily dependent on the leader and operate on the ground only on the basis of general instructions.

► **It is possible that the death of Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi will have a temporary effect on ISIS's activity in Syria and Iraq, focal points of ISIS's control and activity** where al-Qurashi was highly involved in the planning and execution of the attacks. It is also possible that the death of ISIS's leader will **increase its operatives' motivation to carry out attacks to avenge his death, including in the West and especially in the United States**. However, it is unlikely to affect the nature and scope of activity in the more remote provinces where local groups operate. Although these groups have pledged allegiance to ISIS's leader, ISIS's control over them is limited.

► With regard to Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi's possible successor, there are a number of unofficial reports that the new leader is codenamed **Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi** (Twitter, February 6, 2022; ru-maf.net, February 6, 2022). No additional details on him have been disclosed. It should be noted that after Al-Baghdadi's death on October 26, 2019, the name of his successor was revealed only in January 2020.