

**EXCLUSIVE**

**A NEW DOCUMENT SHOWING  
THE INTERNAL TENSIONS OF AL QAEDA**

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ESISC discovered several days ago a new document highlighting the profound discontent that shakes al-Qaeda after the death of Osama bin Laden. The fifteen page text, was "posted" on the IWISC site on the April 6 and resulted from a few comments on social networks, especially on "Twitter".

The IWISC<sup>1</sup> - or Islamic World Issues Study Center - is not, as its name suggests, a research center but, rather, a site close to the jihadist propaganda sphere of al-Qaeda.

Entitled "I am a naked messenger"<sup>2</sup>, it was signed by Abu Bakr al-Zayla'i. Also known as the "Afghan Ibrahim", al-Zayla'i was appointed on September 7, 2008 as Wali ("prefect") of Jubaland and Kismayo by the al-Shabaab<sup>3</sup> organization. We do not know his exact nationality, but it could be Syria or Somalia: the al-Zayla'i name is quite widespread in Syria but also in Somalia where it refers to a family of Muslim scholars of the nineteenth century. Based on the information available, he would be about fifty years old. He joined Abdullah Azzam<sup>4</sup> in Pakistan in 1979 and participated in the first jihad in Afghanistan. He would have also been close to Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Sitt Maryam Nasar, aka Bou Musab al-Suri, a Spanish citizen (he acquired this nationality by marriage) of Syrian origin close to bin Laden and considered an important jihad theorist<sup>5</sup>.

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**1** [www.iwisc.net](http://www.iwisc.net)

**2** In parts of the Middle East Arab, a man who wants to draw attention to a serious problem out of his village, moves away and stripped before proclaiming his claim.

**3** Al-Shabaab release announcing his appointment:

[http://124.217.238.120/b/details.php?item\\_id=1135&sessionid=8013c2e4b68af79e85b13ec9e2eeb73d](http://124.217.238.120/b/details.php?item_id=1135&sessionid=8013c2e4b68af79e85b13ec9e2eeb73d)

**4** University preacher and radical Palestinian origin, he has long taught in Saudi Arabia, Abdullah Azzam was the mentor of Osama bin Laden. Recruited by the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan, he was entrusted with the direction of the MAK (Maktab al-Khedamat or "Services Office" to Mujahideen) that bin Laden would later collect old members to form al Qaeda. He was murdered in mysterious circumstances on November 24, 1989.

**5** Captured in 2005 in Quetta and detained in a secret CIA, al-Suri was then delivered to Syria and imprisoned in Damascus. He was released in late 2011.

Afghan Ibrahim was then sent to Somalia, where he joined the Islamic Courts Union before entering the Shabaab Foundation.

As a matter of fact, the text is written in classical Arabic, very pure and refined, which indicates not only a mastery of the language, but also a real literary culture and a high level of education.

Considered a "theorist of the old school" of al-Qaeda, a-Zayla'i has published several articles, for example, "The death of jihadism in Ethiopia."<sup>6</sup> Essentially, the new text constitutes a diatribe without mercy against al-Qaeda in the region (Somalia and Yemen) and indirectly questioning its new leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. If he sometimes mentions Afghanistan and the Taliban, "Ibrahim Afghan" mainly focuses on the situation in Somalia and the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia and Kenya).

He denounced the authoritarian management of the terrorist organization, its lack of respect for the "fighters" and abuses against their rights, before stressing that this situation strongly limits the capacities of recruitment and threatens the whole organization.

"We knocked on doors for several years, he wrote, to find a solution to this situation and put the organization on the right path to avoid sinking. The voices of reformers are high in vain, several leaders still support the persecutors."<sup>7</sup> It is probably his inability to be heard within the organization that explains why he carries today the debate on the public place.

Clearly, in his eyes, the risk for al-Qaeda comes less from its enemies than from its own leading commanders. "If, before the gnawing fear we see the fruits of our jihad stolen by outside parties, today, we are aware that internal deviation could cause the collapse of these fruits and their loss forever."

He denounces the secret prisons run by the head jihadists: "There are many kinds of prisons run by the Movement [Shabaab and AQ] as ordinary prisons in the provinces and nobody talks. But there are several secret prisons run directly by the Emir. Other leaders and scholars of the mujahideen are not allowed to control. Whoever enters these prisons is considered dead. That comes out is like a newborn. Every day, we try to manage the effects caused by the bitter existence of these prisons. In short, what happens in these jails, in terms of violations of the rights of defendants, who are neither tried nor convicted, is horrible."

Al-Zayla'i recalls that several scholars and officials have called for the closure of the prison or their control, but these requests were unsuccessful: "Worse, many of these prisons have increased and the situation in the prisons became darker (...) the reformers failed to convince the Emir and information on what is happening in secret caves and individual cells. There is no doubt that the movement members feel uncomfortable after the revelation of the existence of these secret prisons built away from their eyes. They knew nothing of the suffering endured by those who are detained.

In addition to the possible ideological differences and the usual paranoia of armed organizations, this large-scale internal repression has its origin in the jealousy of the "little chiefs" and their fear of being supplanted by more experienced and legitimate leaders: "Most individuals whose names appear on the list of most wanted terrorists for terrorism by the United States, the EU and neighbouring countries are tracked, detained, forced into exile or marginalized by the movement. There are only a few exceptions to this situation. '

Note that the fighters are not the only ones to incur the wrath of the direction: "Many clerics and preachers were excluded from many spheres of influence such as education. Some were forbidden to write and publish. '

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<sup>6</sup> In May 2010

<sup>7</sup> On page 6 of the document

Turning to a broader critique of al-Qaeda, the author notes that since 2001, AQ "has lost ground and failed to create a single Islamic state" while losing at the same time, "sympathy and sincere Muslim tribes in both Afghanistan and Yemen."

One consequence of this loss would dry up recruitment and particular difficulty in finding volunteers for "martyrdom missions" (suicide bombings), especially as some of them have been executed for refusing to commit some attacks (eg against mosques).

Another consequence is that despite the presence of dozens of members of the Shabaab who create local units in Kenya and Ethiopia, AQ was unable to extend the jihad to these countries, however close to Somalia and strongly implied in supporting the legitimate government of Mogadiscio.

He carefully avoids a frontal attack on al-Zawahiri; Ibrahim the Afghan nevertheless indirectly targets him when he denounces the "authoritarianism and dictatorial spirit of several senior executives of the organization" and emphasizes the passivity of the Supreme head against these abuses. The result of this decay is that more regional or local groups are acting on their own initiative, without taking into account the guidance received.

The text ends with a call to al-Zawahiri to intervene in order to avoid a fratricidal war between jihadi groups, to order the cessation of persecution against fighters, it forces Emirs concerned to close secret prisons and it focuses the discussion to resolve discrepancies.

This is certainly not the first time that al-Qaeda has been shaken by tensions between factions. The movement had experienced such turmoil when bin Laden criticized the attacks against the tribal leaders and former officials of the Ba'ath Party in Iraq (which had disgusted many foreign volunteers and cost al-Qaeda in Iraq sympathy tribes). The issue of women's employment in the jihad, how to operate abroad, the conduct of the jihad in Afghanistan (especially after the death of Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, in 2010<sup>8</sup>) has caused many discussions and exchanges of letters<sup>9</sup>. But in general, these clashes were confined to the circle of leaders and eventually were known to the older members of the organization. It was rare that they are brought to the attention of a wider audience. And, moreover, Osama bin Laden kept a "legitimacy" and an aura that allowed him to resolve conflicts and be heard by many.

The approach of Abu Bakr al-Zayla'i suggests Ayman al-Zawahiri, long known for his authoritarian tendencies, his brutal leadership mode and his absolute dogmatism, no longer enjoys the same status. A year after the death of Bin Laden, al-Qaeda may be trying to realize that by accepting to bring him to its head was a mistake that could ultimately be fatal.

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<sup>8</sup> Also known under the name of Sheikh Saeed al-Masri, al-Yazid, was born in Cairo in 1955, was appointed head of QA Afghanistan in August 2007. He was killed by a drone May 21, 2010 in Waziristan.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example: *The Osama Bin Laden Files: letters and documents Discovered by SEAL Team Six raid on Their falling on Bin Laden's Compound, with an introduction and analysis of the Combating Terrorism Center, New York, Skyhorse Publishing, 2012.*