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Special Dispatch No.5270

## Confusion On Jihadi Forums, Twitter Following Unexpected Message By Leader Of Jabhat Al-Nusra Regarding The Group's Merge With Al-Qaeda In Iraq

Earlier today, April 10, 2013, Jabhat Al-Nusra (JN) leader Abu Muhammad Al-Joulani released an audio recorded message in which he pledged allegiance on behalf of his group to Al-Qaeda and its leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri.<sup>[1]</sup> Al-Joulani's message comes on the backdrop of a message by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) – Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq – from two days earlier where he declared the merging of ISI with JN under the name The Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham.<sup>[2]</sup>

Al-Joulani's message was released on JN's Twitter account and over top jihadi forums. The Shumoukh Al-Islam forum, which is typically used to release JN messages, became inaccessible around the same time. As of this writing, Shumoukh Al-Islam has resumed its normal function and Al-Joulani's message appears on the forum in the subsection dedicated solely to the group's releases.

Al-Joulani's message has thus far managed to generate mixed responses from jihadis. In fact, these responses already surfaced online following Al-Baghdadi's initial announcement of the merge two days ago. The latter, despite being celebrated by many as a move in the right direction, was negatively perceived by others, especially due to the merge's possible negative implications on the Syrian struggle. One such prominent case was that of Sheikh Abu Basir Al-Tartusi, who, the day after ISI's announcement, claimed that such a move would end up impeding the Syrians from fulfilling their aspirations, while at the same time increasing Western interference in Syria's affairs.<sup>[3]</sup>

The release of JN's message was more or less expected by jihadis; however, its content took them by surprise. The merge, according to Al-Joulani, was not the product of a well-coordinated decision-making process by ISI and JN, but rather a unilateral decision made by ISI. In fact, Al-Joulani said that he only learned about the merge post factum from the press. Therefore, Al-Joulani, who was expected to welcome and celebrate his group's merge with ISI, voiced more restraint and surprise. Still, faced with ISI's announcement, and the expectations that he maintain unity in the jihadi movement as a whole, Al-Joulani accepted Al-Baghdadi's decision.

Still, Al-Joulani manages to voice some measure of disagreement and defiance to Al-Baghdadi's decision. For example, Al-Joulani announced that JN would retain its banner after Al-Baghdadi announced earlier that JN would adopt ISI's banner instead. Also, in his pledge of allegiance to Al-Qaeda and its leader, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Al-Joulani did not mention Al-Baghdadi as his emir. This could be another indication of Al-Joulani's overall reluctance to be part of ISI.

Responding to Al-Joulani's message, some jihadis questioned the authenticity of the announcement, especially in light of Shumoukh Al-Islam's brief period of inaccessibility around the time of announcement's release. Some suggested that Shumoukh Al-Islam was possibly infiltrated, and that Al-Joulani's message was altered or fabricated somehow. However, others welcomed Al-Joulani's message. Assad Al-Jihad2, a prominent contributor on jihadi forums, welcomed the message on his Twitter account, while casting heavy doubts on ISI's function in recent years. He said: "For years I have been noticing faultiness in the 'Islamic State of Iraq' group, [which has been] increasing in severity day by day." Others, such as 'Abdallah bin Mohammad, a known author

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publishing strategic papers, wrote on his Twitter shortly after JN's announcement: "Official: Al-Joulani, leader of JN, denies the merging of Al-Jabha [i.e. JN] with the [Islamic] State of Iraq organization."

It seems that with regard to the former ISI-JN lack of coordination, supporters of the merge and supporters of JN maintaining its independence are roughly equally divided. Some jihadis have said that in order to put matters back on the right track, a response from Al-Baghdadi is warranted.

#### Endnotes:

[1] See MEMRI JTTM Report [Jabhat Al-Nusra Leader Abu Muhammad Al-Joulani Pledges Allegiance To Al-Qaeda And Al-Zawahiri](#), April 10, 2013.

[2] See MEMRI JTTM Report [ISI Confirms That Jabhat Al-Nusra Is Its Extension In Syria, Declares 'Islamic State Of Iraq And Al-Sham' As New Name Of Merged Group](#), April 8, 2013.

[3] See MEMRI JTTM Report [Al-Tartusi: Establishment Of ISIS Will Increase Regime's Massacres Against Syrian People, Justify Western Interference In Syria](#), April 09, 2013.

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