



International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism



Talking to Abu Qatada about Donald Trump's Presidency and the Future of the Middle East

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AMMAN, Jordan: What does Abu Qatada, the so-called “spiritual father” of al-Qaeda in Europe and man responsible for a fatwa on Algeria that some argue offered ideological justifications for killing civilian family members of Algerian military officers, resulting in the beheadings of many,² have to say about the Trump Presidency and the territorial defeat of ISIS? Last January, shortly after the inauguration of President Trump, ICSVE’s Anne Speckhard and Ardian Shajkovci sat down with him on the outskirts of Amman, Jordan, to ask him for his opinion on the Trump presidency and the future of the Middle East. Because his son was briefly imprisoned, by the Jordanians, Abu Qatada requested that we not publish this piece until now. Since then we have interviewed him twice again, in December 2017, during which he surprised us greatly with his views on the legitimacy of terrorist attacks against civilians (see part two of this series). This is thus a two-part series based on four total conversations over the past year with Abu Qatada.

Abu Qatada: Part One

Dressed in a long dark thobe and his grey beard reaching over his chest, Abu Qatada hosts us in a large diwan in his stone hewn home on the outskirts of Amman, Jordan, its walls filled with scholarly books about Islam. As we are served coffee on a tray that Abu Qatada accepts from unknown female hands beyond a doorway inside his home, I glance about the room. His desk is filled with books, and like mine at home there are many piled up beside his chair. It’s obvious we are in the home of a scholar.

While an angry ideologue, Abu Qatada is also an articulate man who can illuminate how those supporting al-Qaeda consider how their strategic plans might unfold. He is a barometer of sorts on a whole other type of thinking. We start our discussion on President Trump and the future of the Middle East.

“It’s a very difficult question,” Abu Qatada answers regarding our question about what he thinks will be the future of the Middle East. “There is something coming, which nothing can stop it from changing this area,” he predicts, as his large brown eyes gaze across the room trying to glimpse what the future may hold. “The region will be more fragmented. This system of nation-states that was created after World War II will disappear in our region. Saudi, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Jordan will dissolve. Their central governments will end.”

He told us the same in November 2016, mentioning that Yemen, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and Syria had already collapsed, or were about to, and it was just a matter of time before the entire region of propped up dictators would fall and the region would be engulfed in conflicts.

“What will come in its place?” we ask.

“It will become more fragmented. I’m not sure, it could happen in America too,” he states. But here, I am sure it will happen, because the differences in society are becoming strong and the gap is deepening.” As Qatada continues.

As we consider his answer, one cannot help but reflect on the perceptions of class conflict that has also grown more prevalent in the recent years in the United States. How often, these days, the same words are said about American society in regards to tensions between the poor and the rich and to the losses in the middle class? Could inequalities in income and wealth ultimately lead to rebellion even beyond the Middle East, or even globally? Highly improbable, but points out the potential societal costs of inequality and the divisive politics it may potentially lead to both at home and more likely, abroad.

We ask him what differences in society he is speaking of in the Middle Eastern context. “Shia and Sunnis are part of the scene, but are not the whole thing. The Jewish dream of dominating from the Nile to the Euphrates according to the Torah—you cannot accomplish it because of human nature. This also is part of the issue,” he explains, harking back to his own Palestinian roots and his longstanding anger at the establishment of the Jewish state and according to him, the illegitimate Israeli overtaking of Palestinian lands.

“Israelis cannot control Gaza. It’s the human dimension they cannot control. It’s the same with the Shia. They don’t have the human depth to rule this area. They could have [ruled], before the Syrian uprising. They could have been accepted. Everyone started for their own reasons loving Hezbollah after July’s war [with Israel], he says, referring to the 2006 Israeli incursion into Lebanon. “But after Syria, the ones that like Hezbollah cannot be mentioned in Sunni circles,” he adds.

Indeed, speaking today with Iraqis, Jordanians, and Syrians in the Middle East, we hear much more today about the Shia-Sunni divide—and anger directed at the Shia by the Sunnis—whereas only ten years ago, this anger would more likely have been directed at Israel and the Jews.

The 2003-2006 U.S.- Coalition led war into Iraq followed by al Qaeda in Iraq’s Abu Musab Zarqawi unleashing a furious jihad against the Shia and their subsequent retaliations, coupled now with the Syrian conflict and the war in Iraq restarting, have all opened a sectarian rift and left scars of murderous rage alongside desires for revenge among the victims and their sympathizers on both sides of that divide. It is not about Palestinians and Jews anymore. It has become a much wider sectarian conflict engulfing larger regions in the Middle East.

“Sunnah is not a sect. It is the original,” Abu Qatada asserts, echoing ISIS and al-Qaeda claims that Sunnis have the correct interpretation of Islam. Indeed, these groups claim to follow the original and true form of Islam, and call

Takfir—that is deemed worthy to be killed—all those who do not adhere to their strict and brutal interpretations of Islam. As a person, Abu Qatada is more gentle than they are, but his ideological teachings are of the same ilk.

The Shiites, politically, I'm no longer afraid of them," Abu Qatada explains. "And militarily, I'm not scared of them. The issue could be more complex. What stops the Sunnis from wiping out the Shiites? Are the regimes of the Sunni states?" he asks. "Let's take Saudi Arabia, for example. The Sunni society in Saudi can achieve a big victory against the Houthis [Shia-led insurgency] in Yemen," he says, predicting what soon starts to occur over the last months. "What is stopping them is the regime itself. What is stopping a Sunni leader appearing there are the Sunni regimes themselves, and not the Shite."

"Right now the regimes are stopping the Sunni leadership and putting them in prison," Abu Qatada states referring to his Islamist and militant jihadi brothers. "There is a marginalization of the Sunni power. If the regimes fall, there is Sunni power to wipe out the Shia power. Take the Lebanese, for example, this mosaic. If the state goes, supported by all the disputed parties, the Sunni power, with the Palestinian camps, will lead to getting rid of the Shia parties and its allies." Abu Qatada again harks to his belief in Palestinian militancy and alludes to the proxy war in Syria and parts of Iraq, in which Iranians and Gulf actors serve as sources of financial support for both state leaders and terrorist groups.

"Now Sunnis in Iraq are the majority," Abu Qatada stresses, although factually this is not true, even if Kurds are lumped in with Sunnis. "Everything is confirming that Sunnis in Iraq are the majority. Shia leadership belonging to Arab regimes, they are ruining the Sunni project in Iraq."

"The vision and idea of the Middle East that is upcoming and in which those states will no longer exist brings important questions," Abu Qatada states. "Will their collapse mean that there will be an invasion from the West to our region?"

This is the important question for those of Abu Qatada's following. If the West is non-interventionist, perhaps his vision can come into being with the Sunni Islamists rising to take power, as ISIS tried and briefly established its so-called "Islamic State". If the West stays out will some or many of the Middle Eastern governments collapse, as Abu Qatada predicts, making way for something else, his vision of reshaping the region?

"So what do you think of President Trump?" we ask.

"I don't see the problem in Trump," Abu Qatada answers. "I worry after Trump, what will come to us on the land of al Bab [we presume he refers to Syria], the destroyed land of al Bab."

Abu Qatada is angry about the injustices and bad governance in his region. Perhaps in some ways his anger mirrors the anger and fear over similar issues in the U.S. that propelled the most unlikely of candidates into the U.S. presidency.

“Trump is not the abnormal in the American situation. He didn't' come with an [armed] revolution. Trump is a simple man and he is a reflection of a phenomenon. This is a big loss given that a person like this was able to convince a wide spectrum.”

“In our region we should expect a lot of developments in the West that will affect us,” Abu Qatada explains. “In reality, when it comes to our [Islamist] goals, Trump may be a benefit. What matters most to us is if he is going to continue his support to those regimes who rely on American support? If he is an isolationist, will he stop the financial support for some regimes? If so, that will be very effective for us.” Abu Qatada states.

The reordering of American engagement in the Middle East keeps preoccupying Abu Qatada's thought. He clearly wants the West to withdraw all of its support for current Arab leaders in hopes that their governments will collapse, hastening his version of the Islamic State that he would love to usher into the region in their place. He makes no mention of whether U.S. support that emboldens dictators to use coercive measures at home to suppress extremist dissent actually undermines the credibility of democratic values. Yet that too is an important concern globally as groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS rally the downtrodden and those with real and perceived grievances against their governments to believe in a totally alternative form of governance—as in the ISIS Caliphate—supposedly governed by Islamic ideals. This is Abu Qatada's dream as well although in a less brutal form.

In President Trump's first moves, he invited King Abdullah to the White House and the U.S. continues unabated in its over one-and-a-half-billion-dollar annual investment in Jordan. At that meeting, President Trump reiterated his commitment to Jordan's stability and security while both parties pledged continuing contributions to defeat the Islamic State. The extent of their partnership could be further exemplified by the [withdrawal of the U.S. Ambassador in Jordan at the request of King Abdullah](#). Similarly, President Trump visited Saudi Arabia in May 2017 where he similarly reinforced U.S. support for their government. Abu Qatada also might be quite disappointed at the amount of public praise President Trump gave for the Arab leaders in the region.

What about the surrounding region—will the support continue despite poor governance, corruption, and human rights violations? Will the U.S. continue to lend military support for the governments of Iraq and Syria to be bolstered to

remain strong? These are questions Abu Qatada worries over, as U.S. involvement and support for existing governments in the Middle East could thwart his plans.

“He is only interested in money,” Abu Qatada states. “Withdrawal and money. Will Trump, the businessman, give more money to these ally states? Will he continue the financial aid?”

Indeed, these are important questions as the West must come to terms with whether dictatorships should be supported to the extent they have in light of them ignominiously suppressing not only Islamist but also democratic movements in the Middle East. How should a U.S. President deal with authoritarian rulers who vehemently object to any criticism of their wrong doing or their human rights record, as is the case with many authoritarian rulers in the Middle East? These are important questions that may or may not be answered in this administration.

One must not forget that al-Qaeda rose out of the idea that Arabs would never be able to win dignity and justice as long as the West was propping up dictators who get in the way of movements seeking freedoms, using torture and imprisonments to do it, hence the al-Qaeda idea of going for the “head of the snake”—attacking the West to someday achieve freedom for Arab Muslims from dictatorial regimes.

“What will happen to ISIS?” we ask, changing the conversation to looking at the current Islamic State.

“ISIS is on its way to disappearing,” Abu Qatada answers (in January 2017). In November 2016, he refused to criticize ISIS because they were on their knees and militarily in retreat, but it was clear even then that he was not supportive of their brutal tactics and rush to declare a Caliphate—a premature move in his opinion.

“This leadership is gone. But something new coming is very possible. ISIS will be defeated, but is it the end of ISIS? Al Qaeda and Nusra are over in Syria. It is a reality. Al Qaeda and al Nusra ended in Syria, but a new development happened. A new organization appeared, not ISIS, but Tahrir al Sham, Fateh al Sham. This development will continue,” he adds referring to Salafi organizations formed from al-Nusra and other groups that appear to be continuing in the same ideology despite [claiming to be no longer affiliated with al Qaeda](#).

“So, an armed Sunni rebellion and wanting to take control will continue?” we ask.

“In Syria, one hundred percent, yes,” he answers. “In Iraq, I don’t know. I cannot judge on this.”

Turning back to President Trump, Abu Qatada states, “There is no strategic vision of Trump on ISIS. It’s very clear he has a cowboy mentality. His way of solving a problem is carrying a gun and shooting, but the world is more complex than that. The Americans don’t have experience in our region, like the Europeans do. You have seen how things get out of your control,” he says, referring to the 2003 U.S.-led coalition invasion of Iraq and the current Syrian war.

“Bush did a lot of killing, he was like the raging bull. Obama’s strategy was surgical operation. But with all of this, there are more losses for them. The problem is that people are running toward the problem and are not afraid of it.”

Ruminating about Trump, Abu Qatada asks, “Was he chosen for internal or external reasons? If they [the American people] chose Trump for external reasons, then the Americans are so stupid, worse than stupid, they are morons imbeciles, idiots.” We laugh as he says it. Indeed, President Trump in his first months in office does not seem to be able to take a nuanced view of the Middle East, but perhaps Abu Qatada underestimates the U.S. military and Congress, or the President himself to catch on?

“Putin took advantage of the weakness of Obama,” Abu Qatada answers. “Obama was unable to solve this problem. I have no vision of the economic situation of Russia, but I wonder if their economic situation will allow them to intervene more? But there is obviously a romance going on with Trump.” Interestingly enough, we failed to ask if he thought of the relationship as being more than just a “romance,” as he calls it, perhaps an attempt to reinvigorate old alliances and find new allies to unlock indolent and frozen decades-old conflicts in the Middle East, as some claim?

Clearly Abu Qatada’s hope is that all Western powers will stay out of the region. He hopes that the existing governments will fall and that Sunnis will rise up to create their wider Islamic State.

“What will it look after ISIS?” we ask.

“To look as ISIS as being only the problem in the area is extremely wrong,” Abu Qatada states. Indeed, al-Qaeda in Iraq first rose in response to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and gained support and momentum in response to Sunni leadership being sent home while Shias rose to dominance and Zarqawi came sowing his seeds of terrorist discord. A similar thing happened with ISIS. Lacking security, justice, and dignity, the Sunni population easily supported them in their first moves inside Iraq. Thus, we see that the real answer to

terrorism is not only to defeat terrorists but to remedy the political issues that gave rise to them—issues that require fair and effective governance that delivers security and justice for everyone.

“This is an Islamic problem,” Abu Qatada states. “To look at ISIS and to think that we are fighting ISIS in Syria, Libya, and Yemen is wrong. ISIS is not even shining the most important aspect in this area. It’s part of an explosive and flaming problem in the area for the Muslims. All Muslims need answers. What is our problem? The situation is very bad, inside and out, and people know that the only way for change is fighting, and the only way to solve our problems is to have an Islamic State. There may be differences, but they all share the vision of an Islamic State. To talk about ISIS only is to forget the fact that we have a problem.”

While Abu Qatada insists that armed conflict will come to pass in order for Middle Easterners to be ruled justly, his words find a chord. Focus testing our [Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative videos](#) in which former ISIS cadres denounce the group, Jordanian youth told us, “You know we all want the Caliphate. We just aren’t sure if we want the ISIS Caliphate.” This view was reiterated multiple times. Clearly, there is a search for a just form of governance and that makes youth and others vulnerable to groups like ISIS.

“Please, clarify the “problems?” we ask. “Are you speaking about justice, unemployment, what problems exactly?”

“We are not talking only about injustices. Forget this. To convince the people we are on the right path,” Abu Qatada states imagining his vision of the Arab region. Qaddafi is gone. Assad doesn’t control two thirds of Syria. Yemen is all fragmented. They are over,” he states, perhaps mistakenly discounting the influential Putin-Assad relationship, with Syrian President Bashar al Assad still controlling the areas of Syria that are of most strategic importance to him thanks to Russian airstrikes targeting everyone who threatens his regime.

“We can no longer talk about social justice as the problem. Now the issue is to reestablish the region. Now the organizations are talking about getting rid of injustice, but now we have a problem of defining the future. Those who think that we will simply put these states back together are mistaken.”

“The situation is developing in a very dramatic way,” Abu Qatada insists. “Forget about ISIS. I believe what Wael Hallaq [an American professor at Columbia University, specializing in Islamic jurisprudence] says, that the Islamic State is impossible to achieve given the context in the international world, in the West. These internal differences in the West are creating a bigger gap, but it will not be an Islamic State,” Abu Qatada continues. “States that fall will not be replaced. But it will be all the Muslims in the region living under Islamic rule, not a state, but as an Islamic nation.”

This was the vision of ISIS that is now disintegrating, but despite their loss of territory and capacity, the vision has staying power in a region that is plagued with corruption, security violations, injustice, and unemployment. While Abu Qatada believes that President Trump will play into his hand, hastening the fall of current Arab governance, one would hope that all Middle Eastern rulers from Syria to Iraq, to Saudi Arabia and beyond would realize the need for better decision-making and the need to provide security, justice, economic possibilities and real freedoms to ward off future iterations of terrorist groups like ISIS.

When we return to talk with Abu Qatada in January of 2017, President Trump has been one year in office and has just recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. He has not been the non-interventionist in the region that Abu Qatada had hoped for, the American leader withdrawing all support from who he sees as corrupt regional leaders. And now the U.S. President has handed Jerusalem to the Israelis without any concession to the Palestinians.

“You are talking of Kushner with the deal of the century,” Abu Qatada states. “They want to get rid of us, kick us out of our country. But come to me after five years, keep on visiting me, but after five years, and all these grand [dealings] will be a mirage. It will have no reality on the ground,” Abu Qatada predicts.

“Israel is becoming a burden on the world.”

Referring to President Trump’s time Abu Qatada points out, “When did Trump carry out this decision, what day did he do it, announce it? It was Dec 6, 100 years since Dec 6 1917 when the Balfour Declaration took place [allowing for the creation of Israel]. Do you think this is a coincidence?” he asks. “Trump has been now a year, why did he chose this day, definitely there is an ideological issue with it.”

When I tell Abu Qatada that not all Americans agreed with this decision, he states, “I’ve learned with Westerners, you always try to lessen the sharpness of the pain inside of us. You always try to soften the blow.”

“Despair could come out of it,” he says referring to the loss to Palestinians, “but take it as a basis of principle. There is something that exists in history, the reality of history, and it is the blunder,” Abu Qatada warns. “This blunder becomes stronger. The stronger the mistake is, the more powerful the mistake is in its destruction. Israel is a settlement state—a garrison state—and garrison states always will always be defeated. I describe settlements as putting a

foreign entity in your body. You always need serums and injections to support them.”

Turning back to the larger Arab world, Abu Qatada predicts, “There will be strategic changes in the world and America will be affected by the changing situation. I believe there will be new governments in Saudi and Egypt. They will deal with the U.S. as Iran is dealing with America. They will say the word ‘no’. And the quiet majority will be crying over what Trump did. After Trump new things will come...”

While Abu Qatada is certainly correct in regard to regional alliances shifting and Arab leaders that may continue to be toppled, and that the region is and may continue to be plagued with challenges from corruption, suppression of human rights, religiously linked terrorism and armed conflict, how the Trump administration plays its hand in the region may make for something far less violent than he is predicting. On that, only time will tell.

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¹ Special thanks to Ranya Kadri for interpreting and facilitating this interview.

² Hutfaiifa Azzam Interviewed by Anne Speckhard, Amman, Jordan (November 3, 2016).