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al-Qaeda/al-Ablaj Threat Assessment
v1.0

PUBLIC RELEASE VERSION

30 May 2003
02:00:01 EST / 07:00:01 GMT

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Page 1 of 9 - v1.0 – 30 May 2003
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>ASSESSMENT</i> _____	3
<i>INTRODUCTION</i> _____	3
<i>ABU MOHAMMED AL-ABLAJ</i> _____	4
<i>AL-MAJALLAH</i> _____	4
<i>THREAT OF IMPENDING ATTACK AGAINST AMERICANS</i> _____	5
<i>THREAT OF ATTACK AGAINST ISRAELI INTERESTS OUTSIDE OF ISRAEL</i> _____	5
<i>THREAT OF ADDITIONAL STRIKES IN GULF REGION</i> _____	6
<i>WATER THREAT</i> _____	6
<i>SARIN THREAT</i> _____	7
<i>NUCLEAR THREAT</i> _____	7
<i>TACTICS/TARGETING – USE OF SUICIDE BOMBERS W/EXPLOSIVE BELTS</i> _____	7
<i>IRAQ</i> _____	8
<i>OPERATIONS IN KUWAIT & QATAR</i> _____	8
<i>COMMENTS ABOUT RIYADH ATTACK (BEFORE & AFTER)</i> _____	8

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Page 2 of 9 - v1.0 – 30 May 2003
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ASSESSMENT

While it is impossible to ascertain the exact nature of al-Ablaj's comments regarding sarin and the poisoning of water supplies, it is clear that al-Ablaj said an attack against Americans would occur following his latest interview with *al-Majallah*, which was published on 25 May. Due to Abu Mohammad al-Ablaj's previous messages to *al-Majallah* providing advance notice of the Riyadh attack, one 35 days and another about 48 hours prior, his latest threat delivered through an established channel should be taken with serious concern.

INTRODUCTION

This report is designed to pull together and help make sense of the various comments made by al-Qaeda member Abu Mohammed al-Ablaj in his emails to the Arabic-language news magazine *al-Majallah*.

While al-Ablaj's comments regarding water and sarin have gotten disproportionate attention in the media and other circles, it is our assessment that the most significant comments are those pertaining to a planned series of operations in Gulf states, as well as a threat of an impending attack against US interests, possibly within CONUS.

The comments regarding water and sarin are significant, however, it is impossible to fully understand the context of the remarks without first reviewing the full correspondence between him and *al-Majallah*. The introduction of sarin and water into the interview may have been the result of an *al-Majallah* question or by al-Ablaj himself. We simply do not know. It is also important to point out that sarin and the threat to poison water do not appear to be necessarily linked.

Al-Qaeda has demonstrated an interest in water and conducted research on the subject. In 2002, at least one plot was foiled in Rome, Italy dealing with water. A cell believed to be

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connected to al-Qaeda was apparently working to contaminate the water supply of the US Embassy there with cyanide.

As far back as February 1995 a letter by Ramzi Yousef concerning a strategy to obtain the release of Abdul Hakim Murad in the Philippines was found to contain a reference to water. In the letter Yousef writes, "We also have the ability to make and use chemicals and poisonous gas for use against vital institutions and residential populations and drinking water sources and others."

Once again, it is impossible to know the nature of al-Ablaj's comments pertaining to water without seeing the original correspondence. It is our assessment that when viewing al-Ablaj's comments in light of other recent threats by al-Zawahiri and Thabit bin Qays, the attacks in Riyadh and Casablanca, as well as other developments, that the threat of an attack against Western interests, especially American, is high. An attack using sarin or targeting the water supply are only two of many options al-Qaeda may select.

ABU MOHAMMED AL-ABLAJ

- Alias Mullah Saif al-Din
- First contacted *al-Majallah* in February 2003
- Additional contacts with *al-Majallah* on 7 April, 10 May, 11 May and then following the 12/13 May attack in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. His last communication with *al-Majallah* as of the release of this report is believed to have been during the week of 18 May.
- He described himself to *al-Majallah* as the commander overseeing the "mujahideen training center" for al-Qaeda and Taliban.

AL-MAJALLAH

- London-based Arabic-language news magazine
- Under Saudi ownership
- Sister publication of the newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsat*
- Interviews with al-Ablaj conducted via email by *al-Majallah* correspondent Mahmud Khalil.

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Page 4 of 9 - v1.0 – 30 May 2003
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- *Al-Majallah* did not run stories on initial messages received by al-Ablaj because it had no way to verify his credibility until the Riyadh attack occurred.
- Published interviews with al-Ablaj on 18 and 25 May.

THREAT OF IMPENDING ATTACK AGAINST AMERICANS

- From email sent to *al-Majallah* during week of 18 May: "The good thing about this meeting [interview] is that it will be followed by a gift; as Abu-Abdallah [Osama bin Laden] said: We will make them shed tears of blood." [Response to question on whether there are anticipated operations against Americans.]
- From email sent to *al-Majallah* during week of 18 May: "We are asked this question [Why did al-Qaeda not strike Israel in parallel to the 11 September, Riyadh and Casablanca attacks?] frequently. Israel is protected by walls that prevent the mujahideen from reaching it. Our duty is to strike the chest, not the back, and the United States is Israel's chest. There are young believers in Israel who are striking it from within. We tell and promise them that we are going to cause it pain, make it cry, and deliver devastating blows to it abroad. As to whether it will be of the magnitude of the New York conquest, it will not be before the surprise for the United States. Whatever pains the United States makes Israel cry."
- Al-Ablaj said in an email to *al-Majallah* on 10 May 2003 that al-Qaeda's new strategy is to strike at and carry out terrorist operations that target the Arab Gulf countries and countries allied to the US in addition to attacking the US in its own backyard.

THREAT OF ATTACK AGAINST ISRAELI INTERESTS OUTSIDE OF ISRAEL

- From email sent to *al-Majallah* during week of 18 May: "We are asked this question [Why did al-Qaeda not strike Israel in parallel to the 11 September, Riyadh and Casablanca attacks?] frequently. Israel is protected by walls that prevent the mujahideen from reaching it. Our duty is to strike the chest, not the back, and the United States is Israel's chest. There are young believers in Israel who are striking it from within. We tell and promise them that we are going to cause it pain, make it cry, and deliver devastating blows to it abroad. As to whether it will be of the magnitude of the New York conquest, it will not be before the surprise for the United States. Whatever pains the United States makes Israel cry."

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Page 5 of 9 - v1.0 - 30 May 2003
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THREAT OF ADDITIONAL STRIKES IN GULF REGION

- Al-Ablaj said in an email to *al-Majallah* on 10 May 2003 that al-Qaeda's new strategy is to strike at and carry out terrorist operations that target the Arab Gulf countries and countries allied to the US in addition to attacking the US in its own backyard.
- Al-Ablaj said in an email to *al-Majallah* on 11 May 2003 that Osama bin Laden has strong inclinations towards utilizing guerrilla warfare tactics in the Arab Gulf region similar to the fighting done by mujahideen against Soviet and American forces in Afghanistan. He said the mujahideen "are ready to carry out many and very big operations. They are preparing something momentous. Al-Qaeda organization will move the battle with the guerilla warfare expertise it had gained in Afghanistan and Chechnya to the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula and that air bases, warships, and camps will be targeted."
- Al-Ablaj said in an email to *al-Majallah* on 11 May 2003, in reply to a question about threats to target security forces in Saudi Arabia, "The list of assassination, the attack groups, and the suicide bombers teams are ready. There are weapons, ammunition, and explosives depots and the authorities cannot discover their locations."
- In an email sent to *al-Majallah* on 11 May 2003, "We will at first make the atmospheres tense so as to confuse the security organs and then carry out qualitative operations and deliver lethal blows at the core."

WATER THREAT

- It is impossible by reading the quotes in the below bullet pertaining to a threat against water by al-Ablaj to ascertain the true nature of the comments without looking at the complete correspondence between him and *al-Majallah*. In one possible scenario, *al-Majallah* may have asked al-Ablaj about a threat to water and he simply replied that al-Qaeda does not rule it out. In another possible scenario, al-Ablaj may have introduced the subject of water himself.
- On 23 May 2003, the Arabic-language newspaper Elaph printed what appeared to be excerpts from an interview with al-Ablaj in *al-Majallah*, which was printed on 25 May 2003. The Elaph article said, "The al-Qaeda organization said that it will use new methods of fighting the Americans, indicating its intention to poison the drinking water

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of several American states." Further down in the Elaph article the tone was less direct, "And al-Ablaj would not rule out al-Qaeda's use of sarin gas and poisoning of the drinking water in American & Western cities..." This second quote appeared in the 25 May *al-Majallah* issue, which contained the roughly four-page interview with al-Ablaj.

SARIN THREAT

- It is not clear from the *al-Majallah* interview if al-Ablaj brought up the subject of sarin or if it was introduced in a question by *al-Majallah*.
- From email sent to *al-Majallah* during week of 18 May: "[al-Ablaj did not rule out the possibility of] al-Qaeda's use of sarin gas and poisoning of the drinking water in American & Western cities."
- From email sent to *al-Majallah* during week of 18 May: "As to the use of sarin gas and nuclear [weapons], we will talk about them then and the infidels will know what harms them. They spared no effort in their war on us in Afghanistan and left no weapon but used it. They should not therefore rule out the possibility that we will present them with our capabilities."

NUCLEAR THREAT

- From email sent to *al-Majallah* during week of 18 May: "As to the use of sarin gas and nuclear [weapons], we will talk about them then and the infidels will know what harms them. They spared no effort in their war on us in Afghanistan and left no weapon but used it. They should not therefore rule out the possibility that we will present them with our capabilities."

TACTICS/TARGETING – USE OF SUICIDE BOMBERS W/EXPLOSIVE BELTS

- From email sent to *al-Majallah* during week of 18 May: [Response to question about the possibility of using suicide bombers with explosive belts in US and Western cities] "Our operations differ from one country to another according to the capabilities and available resources. We always seek the joints, gaps and loopholes, especially the deeper ones. And there are many of these to the intelligent and smart person. This facilitates and accelerates our successive and constant blows. Our targets are always strategic. As to the

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Page 7 of 9 - v1.0 – 30 May 2003
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use of sarin gas and nuclear [weapons], we will talk about them then and the infidels will know what harms them. They spared no effort in their war on us in Afghanistan and left no weapon but used it. They should not therefore rule out the possibility that we will present them with our capabilities.”

IRAQ

- From email sent to *al-Majallah* during week of 18 May: “Iraq is a copy of Afghanistan but a bigger arena for the confrontation, explosions, and ambushes and is better for exhausting and bleeding the enemy.”
- From email sent to *al-Majallah* during week of 18 May: “Al-Qaeda elements are fighting side-by-side with the Iraqis.”

OPERATIONS IN KUWAIT & QATAR

- From email sent to *al-Majallah* during week of 18 May: "Despite our quick preparations and efforts, this does not mean that we have absolute capabilities. It also does not mean that our jihad in one area indicates we are ignoring another area. The winning card is not used just at any time. The timing and venue of our operations are not as our enemy's wish. He cannot drag us but we drag him to the venue and the timing that we decide. War is not a game or a three-hour American movie but precise, step-by-step, systematic details that we deduce from every operation and its resultant consequences. We then start another action to strike another part of this snake. This does not prevent us from clipping the wings."

COMMENTS ABOUT RIYADH ATTACK (BEFORE & AFTER)

- Al-Ablaj said in an email to *al-Majallah* on 7 April 2003 that they had completed their preparations to carry out a massive action targeting the Saudi regime and to strike the rear of the US Army. He said the action would be executed within one month or less. He said, “We are now in the stage of preparing, getting ready, equipping groups and weapons, and making intensive arrangements. The world will see how we are going to make the United States pay a price for its invasion of Iraq. These preparations of ours are for strikes at the United States and other targets and implementation of this has become very imminent.

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The ‘crusader’ army's rear must be hit. This is how we will help Iraq, by Allah's will. The details will come to you later, by Allah's will. The female martyrdom bombers are ready. The commanders managing the operations have arrived. What we were aspiring for was to have the region reach the stage of tension and this has happened. I will provide the details later. The important thing is that only one month at most or less is left for them.”

- Al-Ablaj said in an email to *al-Majallah* on 10 May 2003 that the uncovering of the group of 19 individuals and subsequent efforts by Saudi security forces to arrest them did not impact them and that the plan is proceeding without any significant changes. He said the time is getting closer day by day to prove the validity of what he is saying. The attacks on the housing compounds in Riyadh were executed about 48 hours later.

- Al-Ablaj said in an email to *al-Majallah* on 11 May 2003, in reply to a question about threats to target security forces in Saudi Arabia, “The list of assassination, the attack groups, and the suicide bombers teams are ready. There are weapons, ammunition, and explosives depots and the authorities cannot discover their locations.”

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