

BAD TO THE LAST DROP: The ISIS tactic while trying to hold Raqqa in August was to fight to the last man; experts expect the same in the upcoming battle to retake Mosul.



Return (Dead) to Sender

IN A LETTER TO BESIEGED ISIS FIGHTERS, A COMMANDER TELLS THEM NOT TO COME BACK ALIVE

THE MESSAGE from the head of ISIS's war committee to his besieged comrades is clear: Stay and fight to the death—or we'll kill you. "Inform all our besieged brothers that we will never accept withdrawal.... We will kill all who withdraw or encourage withdrawal and work for it. And we order you, Abu Yahya, to kill all who withdraw," the unnamed leader writes in a letter apparently sent on August 8 from the headquarters of the Islamic State militant group in the Syrian city of Raqqa to its fighters in the then-besieged Syrian city of Manbij. The three-page handwritten letter is addressed to Abu Yahya al-Shami, who was the top ISIS commander in Manbij.

Three experts who examined the letter at our request believe it to be genuine, but *Newsweek* cannot independently confirm its authenticity because of the difficulties of reporting in territory held by ISIS. A rival rebel official provided a *Newsweek* reporter with a copy of the letter. All the experts drew the same

conclusion from the document: If that's how ISIS leaders were addressing their fighters the last time they were besieged, that's how they'll be communicating with the thousands of ISIS members currently in the Iraqi city of Mosul. A U.S.-backed coalition began an offensive against the city on October 17.

Experts on ISIS's administrative documentation—including Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, a research fellow at U.S.-based think tank the Middle East Forum who translated the letter for *Newsweek*—say the document is most likely genuine. It contains what al-Tamimi says is an "authentic" stamp from the group's war committee, a bureau attached to the delegated committee, an oversight body in the group's leadership structure.

In the letter, the leader acknowledges that some fighters wish to leave the caliphate. He also notes that some might want to "hand themselves over to the *kuffar*," or disbelievers—a reference to enemy forces. He offers

instructions, as well as a religious justification, for how al-Shami must deal with these members.

"Know that this is apostasy, so kill whoever it is established is doing this," he writes.

The leader then identifies a group of people, likely locals, who were allegedly supporting the moderate Syrian rebel forces fighting ISIS in Manbij and "rejoicing in their victory." He tells al-Shami again that "this is also apostasy," so he must "kill the one who does that."

Experts say it's highly likely that ISIS leaders in Raqqa are sending similar instructions to their fighters in Mosul. "It is a binary 'You're with us, or you're against us,' and there is nothing in between," says Charlie Winter, senior research fellow at British think tank the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence. "I think that [the same message to fighters] would be reflected in any battle to defend Mosul—a similar push towards removing dissenters."

The U.S.-backed forces attacking ISIS in Mosul might find comfort in how the battle for Manbij concluded: The last ISIS fighters in the city chose life over death, defied orders and fled. **N**

BY
JACK MOORE
@JEXM
AND
RENA NETJES
@RenaNetjes

FROM LEFT: NEWSWEEK; REUTERS