

## Leading Egyptian Jihadist Sayyid Imam Renounces Violence

By Jarret Brachman

IN NOVEMBER 2007, Sayyid Imam `Abd al-`Aziz Imam al-Sharif, the former mufti of Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) and mentor to Ayman al-Zawahiri, released his much anticipated book, *Tarshid al-Jihad fi Misr wa al-Aalam* (*Rationalizations on Jihad in Egypt and the World*). Published in serialized format by the Egyptian daily *al-Masry al-Youm*, the book is already being hailed within official Egyptian circles as the definitive renunciation of violence by one of the most influential jihadist thinkers alive today.

Sayyid Imam, better known by his *nom de plume* Abd al-Qadir ibn Abd al-Aziz or his moniker Dr. Fadl, is a living legend within the global jihadist movement.<sup>1</sup> Two of his books, *Risalat al-Umdah Fi I`dad al-Uddah* (*Foundations in Preparing for Jihad*) and *al-Jami fi Talab al-`Ilm al-Sharif* (*The Comprehensive Book about the Pursuit of Glorious Knowledge*) are core jihadist texts: over the past decade, they have been found in the hands of terrorist cells worldwide. Sharif's other writings, such as *The Five Ground Rules for the Achievement of the Tradition of Victory or its Absence*, *The Manhaj of Abl As-Sunnah Wal-Jama`ah* and *The Refutation of the Doubts Concerning Bay`ah and Imarah* are actively shared in their original Arabic and in English translation online.<sup>2</sup>

### Countering Jihadist Ideology

Sayyid Imam's current book is an attempt to counter those earlier works by way of a *fiqh*-based (legal) series of clarifications and reconsiderations. The jihadist use of violence in trying to overthrow Islamic governments is both counter-productive and religiously unlawful, Sayyid Imam now argues. *Da`wa*, or the practice of publicly calling others to Islam, is a much safer, effective and religiously justifiable way to channel one's grievances against a

regime. Sayyid Imam prompts Muslims to try non-violent attempts to reform (*al-islah*) laws that are not in accordance with Shari`a. He advises that Muslims flee state persecution (*al-hijra*) when necessary instead of fighting, or isolate (*al-`uzla*) themselves from corruption that cannot be escaped. Muslims should pardon (*al-`afw*) the harmful actions of others, forgive (*al-safb*) one's enemies, shun (*al-i`rad*) those who advocate un-Islamic behavior and maintain patience (*al-aabr*) in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges.

According to Sayyid Imam, in judging whether or not to employ violence, particularly against an Islamic government or foreign tourists, one must always consider whether the potential damage of such an act outweighs the potential benefits that could be gained. Since violence only leads to death, destruction and further violence, Sayyid Imam concludes that it can never be justified within Islamic law and must, therefore, never be applied on religious grounds. On practical grounds, he suggests, armed action against an entrenched power does not make historical sense; after decades of violence in Egypt, for instance, jihadists have yet to overthrow the ruling regime. Sayyid Imam's approach, therefore, is to maintain his ideological commitment to applying Shari`a on Earth, but to reject the use of violence against governments who fail to apply it. He can, therefore, maintain his Salafist credentials while also appeasing his Egyptian overseers.

Sayyid Imam's *Rationalizations* is one in a series of recantations emerging out of the Egyptian government's initiative to quash radicalism within its borders. The historic leadership of Egypt's other major terrorist organization, al-Gama`a al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Group), led the charge in 1997 by announcing a formal cease-fire, which they followed in 2003 with a renunciation of violence altogether in the form of two books: *al-Riyadh Bombing: Rulings and Repercussions* and *River of Memories*.<sup>3</sup> As reward for their moves toward reconciliation, Egyptian authorities released more than 900 imprisoned members of al-Gama`a.

One of EIJ's first retractions came in March 2000 from the Egyptian Islamist now living as a political refugee in Germany, Osama Ayyub. Ayyub's attempt to reform Islamic Jihad's ideology generated only limited support, most notably from Shaykh Ahmad Yusuf, the amir of the Bani Suwayf group, and Shaykh Nabil al-Mughrabi, who was serving two life sentences in Egyptian prison.<sup>4</sup>

During the summer of 2004, two more senior EIJ figures, Nabil Na`im, a senior leader of Islamic Jihad in Egypt since Ayman al-Zawahiri left him in charge in the mid-1980s, and his colleague Ismail Nasr, drew up a "draft document" entitled *Visualization*, in which they rejected violent attempts to overthrow Islamic governments and urged the al-Azhar University scholars to publicly readdress the issue. Like Ayyub, Na`im and Nasr could only generate limited support from within the imprisoned Islamic Jihad ranks: Shaykh Ahmad Yusuf Hamdallah, Dr. Ahmad Ujayzah and Shaykh Amal `Abd al-Wahhab were the only major figures to support the move. The competing al-Marj group, led by Majdi Salim and the Abu Za`bal group, led by Ahmad Salamah Mabruk, rejected Na`im's initiative on grounds that he lacked the religious qualifications to authorize such a revision. Sayyid Imam, however, changed the picture.<sup>5</sup>

By 2006, Sayyid Imam had been extradited to Egypt by the Yemenis, and with the support of the Egyptian government he began lecturing with his longtime colleague, `Abd al-`Aziz al-Jamal, to imprisoned members of various jihadist groups in the al-Fayyum Prison on the legal limitations of armed action. As the highest-ranking Islamic scholar in Egyptian prison, Sayyid Imam commanded the respect across jihadist subsets that neither Ayyub nor Na`im could. Sayyid Imam's book has also caused a stir among his former colleagues who have since launched their own coordinated response.

4 Muhammad Shafey, *Asharq Alawsat*, December 6, 2007.

5 Camille al-Tawil, "The Two Leaders, Dr. Fadl And Abd-al-Aziz al-Jamal, Appear For First Time Since They Were Handed Over By Yemen 2002 Former Amir of Jihad Joins Initiative for Halting Violence in Egypt," *al-Hayab*, March 22, 2007.

1 *Militant Ideology Atlas* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2006), available at [www.ctc.usma.edu/atlas/atlas.asp](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/atlas/atlas.asp).

2 A comprehensive collection of Sayyid Imam's early books can be found in Arabic at [www.tawhed.ws](http://www.tawhed.ws).

3 Jailan Halawi, *al-Ahram Weekly*, October 9-15, 2003.

### Jihadists Respond

After submitting *Rationalizations* to the al-Azhar scholars for their review, Sayyid Imam faxed a statement to *al-Sharq al-Awsat* announcing the impending release of his retractions. Ayman al-Zawahiri took the first shot in his July 5, 2007 video, observing,

I read a ridiculous bit of humor in *al-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper, which claimed that it received a communiqué from one of the backtrackers, who faxed it from prison...I laughed inside and asked myself, "Do the prison cells of Egypt now have fax machines? And I wonder, are these fax machines connected to the same line as the electric shock machines, or do they have a separate line?"<sup>6</sup>

Al-Qa`ida's ideological hitman, Abu Yahya al-Libi, followed Zawahiri's comments in a speech where, rather than interpreting Sayyid Imam's abandonment of jihadist principles as an ideological defeat for the jihadist movement, he characterized it as just another weapon being wielded in the Crusader's "war of ideas."<sup>7</sup> Muslims, he suggested, should dismiss the news as a result of torture, brainwashing and blackmail.

Muhammad Khalil al-Hakaymah, the former al-Gama'a member who has since pledged allegiance to al-Qa`ida's senior leadership, followed Zawahiri and Abu Yahya with a six-point response to Sayyid Imam's book.<sup>8</sup> In it, he said that Sayyid Imam tarnished his religious credentials the moment he broke from Zawahiri in 1993. He accused Sayyid Imam of misrepresenting the reality of jihadist armed action in his book and implied that Sayyid Imam was little more than an armchair ideologue even when he was aligned with the movement. Now in prison, Sayyid Imam has shown just how weak he is to Egyptian government pressure, al-Hakaymah chided, particularly when

compared to the dedication of another imprisoned Egyptian jihadist ideologue, Shaykh `Umar `Abd al-Rahman.

### Conclusion

Sayyid Imam's book will continue to cause al-Qa`ida headaches, particularly because it condemns men like Zawahiri not simply on strategic grounds but on religious and legal grounds, something few hard line scholars have been able to do with any real credence to date. Sayyid Imam traces Zawahiri's record of Shari`a violations back to November 1993 when the Vanguard of Conquest terrorist group, an offshoot of EIJ with which he and Zawahiri were both intimately involved, tried to assassinate Egyptian Prime Minister `Atif Siddiqi.

When the bomb exploded, the prime minister escaped with minor wounds. A 12-year-old girl named Shayma, however, was inadvertently killed by flying shrapnel from the car bomb, which the Egyptian government seized as an opportunity to turn public sentiment against Zawahiri, Sayyid Imam and the EIJ.<sup>9</sup> Nearly 1,000 members and supporters of the group were subsequently arrested and the group plummeted in popularity.

It is possible that Sayyid Imam will be able to harness this newfound attention and use it to create a self-sustaining counter-jihadist movement. According to Nu`man bin `Uthman, the former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), Sayyid Imam's revisions could turn out to be a major ideological defeat for the global jihadist movement because it offers real "preventive therapy" to at-risk youth.<sup>10</sup> For `Uthman, *Rationalizations* demonstrates a compelling middle way for Egyptian Muslims between being a religious lackey and a jihadist terrorist. By rejecting the doctrine of *takfir* (excommunication) and the jihadists' reliance on violence to deal with political grievances, Sayyid Imam seems to believe that he can spark a reformation within Salafist thinking both in Egypt and across the Islamic world. As long as the Egyptian government keeps its

distance from Sayyid Imam's efforts, it just might work.

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6 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Advice of One Concerned," July 5, 2007.

7 Abu Yahya al-Libi, 93-minute video release, September 10, 2007.

8 Muhammad Khalil al-Hakaymah, "Statement About What Has Been Published of the Document Entitled 'Rationalization of Jihad Operations,'" al-Fajr Media Center, November 26, 2007.

9 See Ayman al-Zawahiri's discussion of this incident in *Knights Under the Banner of the Prophet*, which was serialized in *al-Sharq al-Awsat* in December 2001.

10 Nu`man bin `Uthman, "Egyptian al-Jihad Dominates al-Qa`ida," *Djazair News*, November 17, 2007.