

## Abu Muhammad al-Maqqisi: A Counter-Terrorism Asset?

By Joas Wagemakers

ON MARCH 12, 2008, Jordanian authorities released from prison the radical Islamic ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqqisi. He had spent approximately three years in prison on the charge that he had contacted and encouraged terrorists. Al-Maqqisi had repeatedly denied these accusations, however, and had started a hunger strike to protest his prolonged detention.<sup>1</sup> The lack of evidence against him as well as his declining health due to the hunger strike are probably the reasons behind his release.<sup>2</sup>

Although al-Maqqisi's release was not broadcast widely by Western media, it is important to take a closer examination. The mostly Arabic media that did report on his release were unanimous in labeling al-Maqqisi an important thinker within the world of radical Islamic ideology, with one newspaper even calling him "the spiritual father of the al-Qa`ida movement."<sup>3</sup> Even though this particular claim may be an exaggeration, there is no doubt that al-Maqqisi is one of the most prominent radical Islamic ideologues in the world today. His writings are said to have been a source of influence to terrorists in Saudi Arabia<sup>4</sup> and Jordan,<sup>5</sup> his website ([www.tawhed.ws](http://www.tawhed.ws)) is perhaps

the most comprehensive library of jihadist literature on the internet and a report by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point calls him "the key contemporary ideologue in the Jihadi intellectual universe."<sup>6</sup> Considering al-Maqqisi's stature and influence among jihadists, it is not surprising that the news of his release caused expressions of great joy on several radical Islamist weblogs.<sup>7</sup>

Al-Maqqisi's influence on other radicals is not, however, what made him well-known among journalists and scholars alike. The credit for that goes to Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian terrorist who became infamous for his bombing attacks against Shi`a in Iraq and who was killed by U.S. forces in 2006. The two men spent several years in a Jordanian prison together, with al-Maqqisi acting as al-Zarqawi's mentor. When both were released in 1999, al-Zarqawi went to Afghanistan and later Iraq, while al-Maqqisi stayed in Jordan, being re-arrested several times. In July 2005, when al-Maqqisi had just been released a few days before, he used an interview with al-Jazeera to criticize his former pupil for his extreme use of violence and his tendency to target other Muslims.<sup>8</sup> Some have argued that this type of criticism, particularly coming from an important ideologue like al-Maqqisi, could actually help moderate the views of Muslim youth willing to engage in terrorism.<sup>9</sup> It has even been suggested that al-Maqqisi's criticism of

al-Zarqawi is part of a series of moderate "revisions" (*muraja`at*) of his radical ideology,<sup>10</sup> perhaps implying that al-Maqqisi might, in the future, even be used by the Jordanian authorities to discourage others from engaging in terrorism. This article concentrates on al-Maqqisi's views on the use of violence, whether he has indeed become more moderate and what implications this has for any efforts to use him as a counter-terrorism asset.

### The Near Enemy

Although al-Maqqisi, who was born in 1959 and whose real name is `Isam al-Barqawi, is originally from Barqa, a village in the West Bank, he was raised ideologically in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. In the latter two countries he immersed himself in the ideas of Wahhabism, and in the 1980s became involved with the supporters of Juhayman al-`Utaybi, who had occupied the Grand Mosque of Mecca for two weeks in 1979.<sup>11</sup> In this period, he started working on his first book, *Millat Ibrahim*,<sup>12</sup> which he finished in 1984. The book stresses the need for Muslims to employ the concept of *al-wala' wa'l-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal) in their lives, which in al-Maqqisi's view means that Muslims should be loyal and faithful to God in every possible way, while disavowing all forms of polytheism (*shirk*) and its adherents.<sup>13</sup> For al-Maqqisi, polytheism is not just the worship of multiple gods, but also the adherence to non-Islamic laws and obedience to the leaders of Muslim countries, whom he considers infidels (*kuffar*) for not fully applying Islamic law (Shari`a). Since al-Maqqisi views all these as manifestations of unbelief (*kufr*), any positive feelings toward them by Muslims should be seen as misdirected loyalty to others besides God. Since he states that God should be the only rightful recipient of Muslims' loyalty, al-Maqqisi believes that adherence to man-made laws or

1 For more detailed accounts of the exact accusations against al-Maqqisi, see Human Rights Watch, "Arbitrary Arrest and Detention of `Isam al-`Utaibi (Abu Muhammad al-Maqqisi)," December 4, 2007; Human Rights Watch, "Human Rights Watch Letter to Jordanian Prime Minister Dahabi on Detention of `Isam al-`Utaibi (Abu Muhammad al-Maqqisi)," December 4, 2007.

2 *Al-'Arab al-Yawm*, March 13, 2008; *al-Hayat*, March 13, 2008; *Middle East Times*, March 18, 2008; *al-Sabil*, March 18, 2008; *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 13, 2008.

3 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 13, 2008.

4 Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), pp. 2-4; Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State - Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 122.

5 International Crisis Group, "Jordan's 9/11: Dealing with Jihadi Islamism," November 23, 2005, pp. 9-10; Quintan Wiktorowicz, *The Management of Islamic Activism - Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and State Power in Jordan* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 122.

6 William McCants and Jarret Brachman, *Militant Ideology Atlas - Executive Report* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2006), p. 8.

7 For an example of one such posting, see <http://revolution.muslimpad.com/2008/03/12/allahuakbar-shaykh-abu-muhammad-al-maqqisi-is-released/>.

8 For the interview, see al-Jazeera, July 6, 2005. For more on al-Maqqisi's criticism of al-Zarqawi and a detailed description of the relationship between the two men, see for example Steven Brooke, "The Preacher and the Jihadi," in Hillel Fradkin, Husain Haqqani and Eric Brown eds., *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 3 (2006): pp. 52-66; Fu'ad Husayn, *Al-Zarqawi - Al-Jil al-Thani li-l-Qa'ida* (Beirut: Dar al-Khayyal, 2005), pp. 11-15, pp. 101-114; Nibras Kazimi, "A Virulent Ideology in Mutation: Zarqawi Upstages Maqqisi," in Fradkin, Haqqani and Brown eds., *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 2 (2005): pp. 59-73; Loretta Napoleoni, *Insurgent Iraq - Al-Zarqawi and the New Generation* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), pp. 50-77.

9 *Al-Hayat*, March 13, 2008; Personal interview, member of the Saudi opposition, March 11, 2008.

10 *Al-Hayat*, March 13, 2008.

11 Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix, "Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-`Utaybi Revisited," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39:1 (2007): pp. 115-116.

12 This book, as well as all other writings by al-Maqqisi used for this article, was taken from [www.tawhed.ws](http://www.tawhed.ws). Since most of these sources can only be found in html format, referring to page numbers is difficult.

13 Abu Muhammad al-Maqqisi, *Millat Ibrahim wa-Da`wat al-Anbiya' wa'l-Mursalin*, 1984.

obedience to worldly rulers effectively amounts to worshipping other gods. This, in al-Maqdisi's view, is clear polytheism and turns a Muslim into an unbeliever.<sup>14</sup>

The theory of *al-wala' wa'l-bara'* as a means to brand rulers and their legislation as forms of polytheism is further developed in al-Maqdisi's other works. Relying on the example of Ibrahim used in Qur'an 60:4, in which believers are encouraged to show their enmity and hatred of polytheism, he stresses that all Muslims must disavow politicians and their laws. Al-Maqdisi considers the highest form of this disavowal to be jihad.<sup>15</sup> Unlike others, however, al-Maqdisi believes that this jihad should first and foremost be waged against the "near enemy" (i.e. the regimes in the Muslim world). While he does not object to fighting the "far enemy" (i.e. Israel, the United States, United Kingdom),<sup>16</sup> he deems the "apostasy" (*ridda*) of Muslim leaders worse than the "original unbelief" (*kufr asli*) of Jews and Christians<sup>17</sup> and also uses Qur'an 9:123 to argue that the former should be fought first.<sup>18</sup> Al-Maqdisi thus believes that Muslims should show their loyalty to God by giving priority to the disavowal of their political leaders through jihad. Fighting the West, though important, should come later.<sup>19</sup>

14 Ibid. For more on the development of *al-wala' wa'l-bara'* and its role in al-Maqdisi's ideology, see Joas Wagemakers, "The Transformation of a Radical Concept: Al-Wala' wa'l-Bara' in the Ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi," in Roel Meijer ed., *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (London: Hurst, forthcoming in 2008).

15 Ibid.; Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, *Kashf al-Niqab 'an Shari'at al-Ghab*, 1988; Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, *Al-Kawashif al-Jaliyya fi Kufr al-Dawla al-Sa'udiyya*, 1989; Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, *Risalat Munasaba wa Tadbir ila ba'd al-Ikhwān*, no date provided.

16 Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, *Bara'at al-Muwahhidin min 'Uhud al-Tawaghit wa Amanihim li'l-Muharibin*, 2002. For an excellent book dealing with the debate within Islamist circles over which of these two enemies to fight first, see Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy - Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

17 Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, *Hadhibi 'Aqidatuna*, 1997; Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, "Liqa' min khalaf Qadban al-Murtaddin 'Sana'a 1418,'" 1997.

18 Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, *Tabsir al-'Uqala' bi-Talbisat Ahl al-Tajabbum wa'l-Irja'*, 1996; Al-Maqdisi, "Liqa' min khalaf Qadban al-Murtaddin 'Sana 1418.'"

19 For a more detailed and in-depth treatment of al-Maq-

### Revisionism?

For al-Maqdisi ever to be used by the authorities to discourage others from engaging in terrorism, it is clear from the above that he would have to change his ideas drastically. Several examples of the recent past have shown that it is certainly not impossible for radical ideologues to renounce some of their earlier views and take a new, more moderate approach. The Egyptian Jihad Organization, for example, apologized two years ago for its attacks on civilians,<sup>20</sup> and the Egyptian al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya even revised its entire ideology in the 1990s along more moderate lines.<sup>21</sup> Could al-Maqdisi's critical comments on al-Zarqawi's conduct in Iraq signify a similar trend? Muhammad Abu Ruman, a journalist for the Arabic daily *al-Hayat*, believes they do. He argues that al-Maqdisi's criticism of his former pupil is simply the latest example of a revisionist trend in his thinking that began in the late 1990s.<sup>22</sup> While Abu Ruman is certainly correct to point out that al-Maqdisi has been critical of radical Muslims' activities for some time, a closer look at his writings shows that he has not revised his ideas at all and has been remarkably consistent throughout the years.

Al-Maqdisi's criticism of other radical Muslims can mostly be found in three of his writings. The first of these, a huge study on excommunication (*takfir*) of Muslims by other Muslims, scolds radicals for their casual use of this tool to legitimate violence against others. Al-Maqdisi delves into the Islamic legal intricacies of the validity of excommunication<sup>23</sup> and concludes that many of its current day applications, such as calling entire Muslim societies

disi's ideology, see Joas Wagemakers, "A Purist Jihad-Salafi: The Ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (forthcoming).

20 'Abd al-Qadir b. 'Abd al-'Aziz [aka Dr. Fadl, who is Sayyid Imam al-Sharif], one of the most prominent Salafi-jihadi scholars and a former leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, also moderated some of his views later on.

21 For an in-depth treatment of this phenomenon, see Roel Meijer, "Commanding Good and Forbidding Wrong as a Principle of Social Action: The Case of the Egyptian al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya," in Meijer ed., *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*.

22 *Al-Hayat*, March 13, 2008.

23 Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, *Al-Risala al-Thalathiniyya fi'l-Tadbir min al-Ghulu fi'l-Takfir*, 1998.

un-Islamic, are misguided and extreme.<sup>24</sup> Although these ideas are clearly meant to moderate the views of radical jihadists, they are not a revision of al-Maqdisi's earlier statements. None of al-Maqdisi's writings support the extreme views that he criticizes in this book. In fact, al-Maqdisi goes out of his way to point out to his readers that the leaders of the Muslim world are definitely infidels and that he is not criticizing the use of excommunication as such but that some Muslims have simply gone too far in applying it.<sup>25</sup>

The second of al-Maqdisi's writings criticizing other radicals is a study on jihad, in which he evaluates what results the various attempts to fight "the infidels" have yielded. In this book, he criticizes the recklessness of some fighters and laments their lack of knowledge of both Islam and the reality of the country in which they fight.<sup>26</sup> Again, however, al-Maqdisi does not criticize jihad and fighting itself. He stresses that he supports jihad and has had to pay the price for his views.<sup>27</sup> In fact, he praises the 9/11 hijackers for executing such a well-planned operation and states that the jihad needs more people like them.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, even though al-Maqdisi again criticizes young jihadists for being reckless, he sounds like a spiritual leader who feels "his" jihad has gone awry rather than a radical who recants his earlier beliefs.

Al-Maqdisi also uses moral arguments to call for a restriction on bloodshed in his book on jihad, as well as in his letter of advice to al-Zarqawi, the third of his critical writings. In both documents, he laments the great number of casualties among Muslims caused by jihadists and clearly states that many of the targets they select, such as mosques, churches and buses, may not be attacked according to Islamic law.<sup>29</sup> Al-Maqdisi also criticizes the Islamic legal reasoning radicals use

24 Ibid. Al-Maqdisi gives 33 examples of what he considers wrong forms of excommunication. All of these are dealt with in separate chapters.

25 Al-Maqdisi, *Al-Risala al-Thalathiniyya fi'l-Tadbir min al-Ghulu fi'l-Takfir*.

26 Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, *Waqafat ma'a Thamrat al-Jihad*, 2004.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.; Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, *Al-Zarqawi: Munasara wa-Munasaba*, 2004.

for suicide bombings, explaining that killing innocent Muslims is not allowed by pointing out the difference between collateral damage and intentionally killing Muslim women and children.<sup>30</sup> Once again, however, al-Maqdisi does not reject any of his former beliefs. He has never advocated attacking mosques and churches and although he criticizes the reckless use of suicide bombings, he explicitly confirms that they are a legitimate means to fight the enemy, as long as they are used for the right purpose.<sup>31</sup>

#### Counter-Terrorism

It is clear that al-Maqdisi, though critical of jihadists' reckless behavior and lack of knowledge, has not changed his views at all. His criticism of al-Zarqawi in his interview with al-Jazeera, though part of a longer trend, should therefore not be seen as a sign of revisionism. All of the more moderate positions he has taken in the past 10 years are completely compatible with his earlier writings and in many cases simply confirm what he has written before. This means he still believes the leaders of the Muslim world are infidels and considers jihad against them (and the West) to be legitimate. This seemingly excludes al-Maqdisi as a useful tool to combat terrorism.

Still, al-Maqdisi's use as a factor in counter-terrorism may be greater than the above suggests, since a major problem in using former radicals to discourage others from engaging in terrorism is that they lose all credibility in the eyes of the most committed extremists. The latter are unlikely to be turned around by someone who has, in their view, sold out to the enemy.<sup>32</sup> Al-Maqdisi, however, cannot possibly be accused of selling out to anyone and has his prison record to prove it. The credibility and authority this gives him must mean something in the eyes of jihadists. Al-Maqdisi's criticism, precisely because it is coming from a fellow radical who has not changed his views, could therefore have a moderating influence on those committed terrorists who are unlikely to be swayed by anyone else.

In practice, this policy would mean allowing al-Maqdisi to spread his ideas without interfering with him too much as long as he does not materially support terrorism. The drawback of such a policy is that, while possibly helping to moderate an extremely violent fringe among jihadists, al-Maqdisi's still radical writings might simultaneously inspire a whole generation of new terrorists. Considering the fact that the Jordanian government apparently does not have a viable case to keep al-Maqdisi in prison, however, this policy of non-interference may be less unacceptable than it sounds. Moreover, if all jihadists in Iraq had done what al-Maqdisi advised them, there probably would have been a lot less bloodshed.

#### Conclusion

The release of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, one of the most important radical Islamic ideologues alive, seemingly has very little impact on the worldwide efforts to fight terrorism. His ideas, though critical of excesses among jihadists, have always been supportive of violence against both the governments of the Muslim world as well as the West. Al-Maqdisi is, therefore, unlikely to moderate others to such an extent that they will give up their radical ideas altogether. Still, his relative moderation supported by his credibility as an unbending scholar may influence those whose strong commitment and well-informed ideas cannot be influenced by other, lesser figures. Whether governments are willing to give al-Maqdisi relatively free reign for such a new and risky approach, however, remains to be seen.

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30 Al-Maqdisi, *Waqafat ma`a Thamrat al-Jihad*.

31 Al-Maqdisi, *Al-Zarqawi: Munasara wa-Munasaha*.

32 The recent revisionism of former Egyptian Islamic Jihad leader and long-time prisoner Sayyid Imam, for example, met with a spirited rebuttal by Ayman al-Zawahiri.