

An Ideological and Operational Threat: Abu `Amr/ Shaykh `Isa

By Erich Marquardt and Abdul Hameed Bakier

IN PAKISTAN'S TRIBAL regions, the Egyptian cleric Abu `Amr `Abd al-Hakim is proving to be a significant threat to Pakistan. Abu `Amr (also known as Abu `Amru) emphasizes the immediate need to focus attacks on the Pakistani government, rather than on encouraging supporters to strictly concentrate operations on international forces in Afghanistan, or on the "far enemy" abroad. To justify this "near enemy" approach, this previously obscure Egyptian cleric uses his writings and sermons to convince Pakistani Muslims that the government in Islamabad is apostate, declaring its agents *kafirs*. Although little is known about Abu `Amr, a few sources consistently identify him as an Egyptian cleric operating out of Pakistan's tribal areas and identified as "Shaykh `Isa al-Masri." Shaykh `Isa has been named as a close associate of al-Qa`ida's central leadership and, according to Department of Defense documents, previously had played a role in training jihadists in Kabul in "the rules of jihad."¹

Although it is not possible to independently prove that Shaykh `Isa and Abu `Amr are one and the same, a number of journalistic accounts have asserted this connection, a claim that seems highly likely. The majority of the accounts are based on the writings of Syed Saleem Shahzad, the Pakistan Bureau Chief of the Hong Kong-based internet publication *Asia Times Online*.² In a number of his reports, Shahzad has made reference to Shaykh `Isa and has stated that he is also known as Abu `Amr `Abd al-Hakim.³ Although there are many similarities between the two identities, Shahzad's reporting is the only source that clearly identifies the two names as one and the same.

1 "Unclassified Summary of Evidence for Administrative Review Board in the Case of Mouhammad, Maasoum Abdah," Department of Defense, September 1, 2005.

2 Shahzad has reported from Pakistan's tribal regions and has allegedly conducted interviews with senior Taliban leaders on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

3 Syed Saleem Shahzad, "Al-Qaeda Goes Back to Base," *Asia Times Online*, November 4, 2005.

Additionally, Ayman al-Zawahiri has made mention of both names. In his 188-page book *The Exoneration*,⁴ which was released March 2, 2008, al-Zawahiri said that "Abd al-Hakim Hassan" is one of the most trusted Salafi-jihadi shaykhs. He provided details on the shaykh's background—including his knowledge of Islam, his role in jihad and the fact that he was arrested and tortured in Egypt—and then recommended al-Qa`ida's followers to visit the shaykh's website.⁵ In a February 2008 posting of a eulogy for the slain jihadist Abu Ahmad al-Suri, al-Zawahiri said that al-Suri was a perseverant student in the Shari`a college in Afghanistan where "Shaykh `Isa" taught.⁶

In light of claims that Abu `Amr is Shaykh `Isa, it is useful to analyze the activities of both aliases.

Abu `Amr's Biography and Writings

According to a detailed, undated posting on the tawhede.com forum, Shaykh `Abd al-Hakim Hassan Abu `Amr was born in Egypt in 1959 and received an unofficial religious education from Egyptian shaykhs such as Muhammad `Umar Ilyas. He would later study religious jurisprudence and the hadith with mainstream Salafist shaykhs at Egypt's al-Azhar University. Abu `Amr joined the Egyptian Islamic Jihad organization and agitated against the Egyptian government until he was jailed after the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat.⁷ Once released, Abu `Amr pursued further studies in business management. After completing that education, he traveled between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, preaching his literature to shaykhs until 1985. At that point, he moved to Afghanistan to participate in, and preach about the legality of, jihad. During his time in Afghanistan, Abu `Amr was influenced by `Abdullah `Azzam and `Abd al-Qadir `Abd al-`Aziz (also known as Dr.

4 The full title of the book is *A Treatise Exonerating the Nation of the Pen and the Sword from the Blemish of the Accusation of Weakness and Fatigue*.

5 This website is now defunct, but was located at www.kanzhassan.com.

6 One site where the eulogy appears is www.mnbr2.net, with a post date of February 23, 2008.

7 Although this biography of Abu `Amr claims he was jailed after the assassination of al-Sadat, the date provided is 1980. This is clearly a mistake, as al-Sadat was assassinated on October 6, 1981.

Fadl). In 1992, at the start of the Afghan civil war, Abu `Amr moved back to Yemen and taught private religious classes. Once the Taliban began taking control of Afghanistan in 1995, Abu `Amr returned to the country and has

"His e-book is a key text that is used to convince Pakistanis to conduct attacks against the government."

allegedly remained in the region ever since. Once back in Afghanistan, Abu `Amr allegedly set up the religious school *Markaz Salah al-Din li'l-da`wa* (Salah al-Din Center for Preaching) and supervised the publication of the *Ma`alim al-Jihad* (*Signposts of Jihad*) magazine.⁸

Abu `Amr has published a number of writings, including "The Religious Verdict on Reporting on the Mujahidin to Infidel Governments," "The Warning on Supporting Infidels," "The Lebanese War and the Walk on Thorns" and his 118-page e-book titled *al-Idah Wa'l-Tibyan fi anna al-Tawaghit wa Jushahum Kuffar `ala al-Ta`yin* (The Clarification and Explanation Designating the Tyrant Rulers and their Armies as Infidels). His e-book is a key text that is used to convince Pakistanis to conduct attacks against the government. On one site where the e-book is available, a counter alleges that the document was downloaded more than 20,000 times.

In October 2006, the al-Fajr Media Center announced the launch of the website *kanzhassan.com*, which was identified as the site of "Shaykh `Abd al-Hakim Hassan (Abu `Amr)."⁹ The website contained links to a number of *takfiri*/Salafi-jihadi documents attributed to the shaykh. The doctrines promoted by the shaykh on the website were clearly geared toward encouraging and justifying attacks against the "near enemy." At the time, users discussing

8 "The Shaykhs Mentioned by al-Zawahiri in the Exoneration," www.muslim.net, date unknown.

9 "Kanzhassan.com: Site of Cleric Abdel Hakim Hassan (Abu Amru)," Society for Internet Research, www.sofir.org.

kanzhassan.com on the al-Hisba forum expressed surprise over the sudden appearance of the officially-sanctioned site, and they were unaware of the identity of “`Abd al-Hakim Hassan,” which was considered especially surprising since so many jihadist texts were attributed to him. The failure to link this identity with the alias of “Shaykh `Isa” explains why, if these are the same individual, he was able to operate largely off the radar for so long.¹⁰

Even though kanzhassan.com has since been shut down and is no longer available on the web, writings attributed to Abu `Amr can be found on various jihadist websites, such as muslm.net, hanien.inf and el-ekhlaas.net. Abu `Amr’s Salafi-jihadi literature remains popular among jihadist forum members, especially due to al-Zawahiri’s affirmation of his work.

Abu `Amr’s Ideological and Religious Views

In his various texts, Abu `Amr places importance on attacking the “near enemy”—such as Pakistan, and other “apostate” Muslim governments—before the “far enemy.” The debate is far from academic, as Tehrik-i-Taliban, led by Baitullah Mehsud, has launched a terrorist-insurgent campaign against the Pakistani government and military, leading to hundreds of deaths. Analyst Brian Glyn Williams, who has studied the role that Arabs play in this insurgency, has “found considerable evidence that Arab ‘jihad-entrepreneurs’ such as Abu `Amr have played a significant role in providing the legitimacy and inspiration for Mehsud to attack the Pakistani government.”¹¹ Indeed, in Abu `Amr’s document “Are Jihadi Operations in the Infidel’s Country Better than in Muslim Countries Taken Over by Infidels?” he argues that

jihad against the enemy to liberate a country that was previously ruled by Islam but is now occupied, such as Afghanistan, is more binding than conducting jihad in the enemy’s country that hasn’t been conquered by Muslims yet, such as America.¹²

10 Indeed, if this is the case, it is likely he is attempting to keep the connection between the two identities concealed.

11 Personal interview, Brian Glyn Williams, counter-terrorism analyst, July 16, 2008.

12 `Abd al-Hakim Hassan Abu `Amr, “Are Jihadi Op-

erations in the Infidel’s Country Better than in Muslim Countries Taken Over by Infidels?” www.almaqreze.net, date unknown.

“One explanation why Shaykh `Isa was able to increase his stature in Pakistan could be due to the Pakistani government’s increased pressure on Islamists within its borders.”

primary “infidel force” is the Pakistani government itself. Whereas some jihadists recognize that it is counter-productive to launch attacks on Pakistan since that is where they seek shelter after engaging Afghan and international forces in Afghanistan, Abu `Amr represents an uncompromising view that jihadists are increasingly following, as seen in the rising attacks in Pakistan.¹³ One example demonstrates Abu `Amr’s role in local violence in Pakistan. A group of jihadists addressed a question to Abu `Amr, stating that they do not consider many members of the Pakistani Army as “infidels because they are ignorant of the truth,” explaining that “some prominent Pakistani scholars issued *fatawa* declaring them only sinners and not infidels.” Abu `Amr responded to the question by arguing that, according to the Shari`a and sunna, those who support infidels in any manner are infidels themselves. “It is blasphemy to fight or

erations in the Infidel’s Country Better than in Muslim Countries Taken Over by Infidels?” www.almaqreze.net, date unknown.

13 For example, see the recent July 6 suicide attack against Pakistani security forces in Islamabad, which left 15 people dead. See “Pakistani Police Hunt for Clues after Red Mosque Bomb,” Agence France-Presse, July 7, 2008; Mubashir Zaidi and Laura King, “Suicide Strike Targets Pakistan Police,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 7, 2008.

convey intelligence on the mujahidin to infidels and polytheists,” he declared.¹⁴

Nevertheless, Abu `Amr still encourages Muslims to agitate against the “far enemy.” He argues that the current war is of “different types such as military, economic, cultural and social,” and that all Muslims

must do what they can. The battle is not just Afghanistan. We find the enemy everywhere and the nature of the war is different today. As we said, every Muslim, regardless of his nationality, be it Egyptian or Sudanese, has to fight the infidels, the Americans, English and Europeans, civilians or military, in any spot in the world we find them at. The religious proofs of this duty are abundant in Islam and even the foreigners themselves know them.¹⁵

Concerning the Shi`a, Abu `Amr’s views are rigid; he considers them “rejectionists” (*rawafid*) and infidels, calling them “illegitimate children who should be looted and killed.” Abu `Amr believes that the Shi`a “constantly try to undermine” the Sunnis and have “animosity for Muslims and Islam.” He thinks that the Shi`a of Iran, Iraq and Syria who have supported Hassan Nasrallah of Hizb Allah are concocting a conspiracy with the secret blessing of the United States to strike at the Salafi-jihadi mainstream since they are the only ones that shoulder the burden of battle against the enemies of Islam.¹⁶ Abu `Amr forbids any Muslim from supporting the “rejectionist” Hizb Allah, arguing that it is not obligatory to support “just anyone” who resists “the Jews.”¹⁷

14 `Abd al-Hakim Hassan Abu `Amr, “The Clarification and Explanation Designating the Tyrant Rulers and their Armies as Infidels,” www.almaqreze.net, date unknown.

15 `Abd al-Hakim Hassan Abu `Amr, “How a Country Judged an Infidel Home or a Home of Islam,” www.almaqreze.net, date unknown. The suggestion of fighting the enemy across the world and in many different manners is similar to the jihadist strategist Abu Mus`ab al-Suri’s doctrines.

16 `Abd al-Hakim Hassan Abu `Amr, “The Lebanese War and the Walk on Thorns,” www.almaqreze.net, August 10, 2005.

17 Ibid.

Shaykh `Isa's Activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan

One of the earliest reports of a "Shaykh `Isa" operating with the al-Qa`ida leadership came during an October 2001 report for CBS 60 Minutes, when the late journalist George Crile interviewed a Shaykh `Isa, who described himself as Usama bin Ladin's spiritual advisor.¹⁸ During the interview, `Isa provided details about Bin Ladin's daily routine.¹⁹ In documents from the fall of 2005, released by the Department of Defense and containing the summary of evidence for enemy combatants held at Guantanamo Bay, a number of detainees were accused of partaking in training from "Sheikh Issa while residing at the Syrian guesthouse in Kabul," located in the al-Qa`ida enclave area of Wazir Akhbar Khan.²⁰ These documents identify Shaykh `Isa as "an Egyptian, was an *amir* in the Egyptian Jihad Organization [Egyptian Islamic Jihad] and was the chief mufti of al Qaida."²¹ Among those detainees who received training from Shaykh `Isa are Abd al-Hadio Omar Mahmoud Faraj, Ali Husein Muhammad Shaaban, and Maasoum Abdah Mouhammad. According to one summary of evidence case,

reporting indicates that Sheik Issa would provide a two-week training school at his residence in Kabul for Syrians and other Arabs who trained at the Usama Bin Laden camps. He would teach the rules of jihad, that Americans were non-believers, and it was justified to kill them.²²

It appears that Shaykh `Isa relocated to Pakistan and, according to the journalist Syed Saleem Shahzad, became active in Waziristan around 2003, eventually settling in Mir Ali, North

Waziristan where he preached radical, *takfiri* views.²³ Pakistani press reports further state that Shaykh `Isa managed to influence the views of two prominent Taliban commanders, Sadiq Noor and Abdul Khaliq Haqqani, in addition to Baitullah Mehsud's faction and the Uzbek faction led by Tahir Yuldash of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. All of these leaders and factions have shared the belief that the Pakistani government should be combated, and Shaykh `Isa's religious guidance likely helps to religiously ground their tactical objectives.²⁴

In August 2004, the Pakistani government accused Shaykh `Isa of planning a major attack on a number of high level targets to coincide with Pakistan's independence day. The accusations arose after authorities arrested five al-Qa`ida-linked operatives who were planning suicide attacks on the presidential office, prime minister's house, U.S. Embassy in Islamabad and the General Headquarters of the Chief of Army Staff House in Rawalpindi.²⁵ Pakistan's information minister and interior minister claimed that the foiled plot was planned by "Shaykh `Isa and Qari Isma`il," both identified as Egyptian.²⁶

One explanation why Shaykh `Isa has been able to increase his stature in Pakistan could be due to the Pakistani government's increased pressure on Islamists within its borders. Shahzad, writing in August 2006, argued that

the Pakistani military operations in the tribal areas of South and North

²³ Syed Saleem Shahzad, "Al-Qaeda Aims at Pakistan's Heart," *Asia Times Online*, January 1, 2008.

²⁴ Of course, loyalties can change, and if the Pakistani government were to reduce its operations against Taliban militants in the tribal areas, it is possible that these militants would turn their attention back toward outside arenas of jihad.

²⁵ K J M Varma, "Pakistan Foils Major Al Qaeda Plot," *Rediff India Abroad*, August 22, 2004. Among the weapons confiscated included grenades, various explosives, rockets and rocket launchers and detonators.

²⁶ Qari Isma`il, for example, would also later be accused of receiving \$6,500 from Baitullah Mehsud to organize what became the successful assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who was killed on December 27, 2007. See Carlotta Gall, "Pakistani Police Accuse Militant in Bhutto Death," *New York Times*, March 2, 2008.

Waziristan from 2003 to 2005 to root out al-Qaeda fugitives... gave rise to the *takfiri* faction in al-Qaeda, which took advantage of the leadership and ideological vacuum to make its mark. Shaykh `Isa is an example.²⁷

The July 2007 siege of the radical *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) in Islamabad has also proven to be a contributing factor for why jihadists are turning their attention to the Pakistani government. Shaykh `Isa's past involvement with Ayman al-Zawahiri and the al-Qa`ida leadership, in addition to his "near enemy" rhetoric against "apostate" Muslim governments, makes him an ideal leader to influence jihadists. Furthermore, on a more fundamental level, South Asian Muslims tend to be deferential to Arab Muslims due to the importance of the Arabic language in the divinity of the Qur'an and in hadith studies, and this may have contributed to his popularity.²⁸

Today, Shaykh `Isa is still largely operating off the radar, with some reports stating that he is either injured, dead or has left the region. Shahzad, for example, claimed in July 2007 that Shaykh `Isa suffered a stroke and was "bedridden and seriously ill."²⁹ Shahzad also claimed that `Isa was the target of a bomb attack—allegedly from a CIA-operated Predator drone—on December 28, 2007 and was wounded;³⁰ a number of other reports have repeated this claim, yet they are all based upon Shahzad's account. Additionally, a Pakistani security source recently revealed that although Shaykh `Isa operated out of North Waziristan until recently, rumors now place the jihadist leader in the Kandahar region of Afghanistan.³¹

²⁷ Syed Saleem Shahzad, "Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah Look to Make Up," *Asia Times Online*, August 25, 2006.

²⁸ Personal interview, Christopher Heffelfinger, counter-terrorism analyst, July 7, 2008.

²⁹ Syed Saleem Shahzad, "Pakistan in the Grip of a Big Squeeze," *Asia Times Online*, July 24, 2007.

³⁰ It should be noted that both the alleged CIA operation and the assertion that Shaykh `Isa is ill are based upon one account and cannot be confirmed.

³¹ This information is derived from an interview, not conducted by the authors, of a Pakistani security officer who wished to remain anonymous. The interview was conducted in the summer of 2008.

¹⁸ George Crile, "60 Minutes II: Hunt For Bin Laden," 60 Minutes, October 3, 2001. It is not clear whether this is the same "Shaykh Essa," although it is likely.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "Unclassified Summary of Evidence for Administrative Review Board in the Case of Shaaban, Ali Husein Muhammad," Department of Defense, September 8, 2005.

²¹ "Unclassified Summary of Evidence for Administrative Review Board in the Case of Mouhammad, Maasoum Abdah."

²² "Unclassified Summary of Evidence for Administrative Review Board in the Case of Shaaban, Ali Husein Muhammad."

Conclusion

Although it is not possible with the current literature to prove that Abu `Amr `Abd al-Hakim is indeed Shaykh `Isa, the biographies and beliefs of both men reveal many similarities. Regardless, the literature of Abu `Amr is especially popular among jihadists, and his words are being used to convince Pakistan's militants that the "defense of Islam" should begin at home. Abu `Amr's various texts are dangerous for the current Pakistani government, and if concrete evidence³² surfaces that Abu `Amr is indeed the Egyptian cleric operating out of the tribal regions known as Shaykh `Isa,³³ it will mean that this two-fold ideological and operational threat has operated for too long off the public radar.

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³² For example, a statement by either identities declaring ownership of the multiple aliases would suffice.

³³ It is likely that Abu `Amr uses the "Shaykh `Isa" alias in order to maintain his security. Unlike already established ideologues such as Abu Yahya al-Libi, Abu `Amr has not featured in enough press reports to warrant a public admission of his multiple aliases. Furthermore, until recently at least, he appears to have been active in Waziristan preaching his ideology, which would explain why he would want to remain more anonymous than other high-profile al-Qa`ida-affiliated leaders.