

## Invoking Zaraqawi: Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's Jihad Deficit

By Joas Wagemakers

ABU MUHAMMAD AL-MAQDISI has been described as “the key contemporary ideologue in the jihadi intellectual universe.”<sup>1</sup> He is known to most people as the former mentor of the Jordanian leader of al-Qa`ida in Iraq, Abu Mus`ab al-Zaraqawi. His numerous writings criticizing the rulers of the Muslim world,<sup>2</sup> the enormous jihadist library on his website ([www.tawhed.ws](http://www.tawhed.ws)) and the influence he has had on radicals across the world<sup>3</sup> show that al-Maqdisi is indeed a major Salafi-jihadi ideologue.

As a result of al-Maqdisi's radicalism and influence, it is interesting that since his release from prison in March 2008, he has come under criticism from fellow Salafi-jihadis in Jordan and on the internet for not being radical enough. Although this criticism takes on various forms,<sup>4</sup> it is mostly expressed in the claim that al-Maqdisi does not have actual combat experience. Interestingly, both his opponents and al-Maqdisi himself when defending his record against this criticism use al-Zaraqawi to make their point. This article provides a short overview of past relations between al-Maqdisi and al-Zaraqawi, followed by an account of the recent conflict about al-Maqdisi's alleged “jihad deficit.” It will then demonstrate how both parties try to invoke al-Zaraqawi to support their own case.

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

2 See, for example, *Al-Kawashif al-Jaliyya fi Kufri al-Dawla al-Sa`udiyya, Kashf al-Niqab `an Shari`at al-Ghab* and *Mukhtasar Kashf al-Niqab `an Shari`at al-Ghab - Al-Dustur al-Urdunni*, in which al-Maqdisi excommunicates the Saudi, Kuwaiti and Jordanian regimes respectively. All are available on [www.tawhed.ws](http://www.tawhed.ws).

3 Although his influence has been strongest and clearest in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, his best-known writings are read by radical Muslims across the world and have been translated into various languages.

4 Other accusations against al-Maqdisi are that he was weak and opportunistic when he was in prison in the 1990s and that he has revised and moderated his ideas. For a discussion of the latter issue, see Joas Wagemakers, “Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi: A Counter-Terrorism Asset?” *CTC Sentinel* 1:6 (2008): pp. 7-9.

### Criticizing Abu Mus`ab al-Zaraqawi

Al-Maqdisi and al-Zaraqawi met around 1990, when both men were in Pakistan and Afghanistan as part of the large Arab contingent who went to fight the Soviet Union after its invasion of Afghanistan. Although al-Zaraqawi arrived too late to fight the Soviet Union, which had just left Afghanistan, he is said to have participated in the fighting against Afghan communists that followed in the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Al-Maqdisi, significantly, did not participate in any of the fighting.<sup>6</sup>

The two men returned to Jordan in the early 1990s and, at one point, became involved in preparing an attack against Israel in 1994. Since al-Maqdisi wanted to focus on Jordan and missionary activities (*da`wa*), he was not in favor of the attack but considered it legitimate and therefore gave it his blessing.<sup>7</sup> The Jordanian police thwarted their efforts, however, which landed the group in prison. They remained in prison until 1999 when a royal amnesty set them free. Al-Zaraqawi went to Afghanistan and later Iraq, a decision with which al-Maqdisi, who stayed in Jordan, disagreed. Al-Maqdisi believed al-Zaraqawi was not knowledgeable enough to wage a proper jihad and thought his efforts were too unorganized to be successful.<sup>8</sup>

In the years that followed, al-Zaraqawi would—under the spiritual guidance of fellow Jordanian Abu Anas al-Shami—become infamous as the leader of al-Qa`ida in Iraq and was responsible for suicide bombings against Shi`a and coalition soldiers. Al-Maqdisi subsequently wrote a book called *Waqafat ma`a Thamrat al-Jihad* (Positions on the Fruits of Jihad),<sup>9</sup> which was critical of certain jihadist practices in general. He also wrote a letter to al-Zaraqawi

5 Jean-Charles Brisard, *Zaraqawi: The New Face of Al-Qaeda* (New York: Other Press, 2005), p. 17.

6 “Khalaya l-Irhaf fi l-Sa`udiyya Tuwazzi`u Mudhakiratahu wa-Kutubahu `ala A`da`iha,” *al-Watan*, July 5, 2005.

7 “Liqa` min khalaf Qadban al-Murtaddin `Sana 1418,” [www.tawhed.ws](http://www.tawhed.ws), 1997, pp. 4-5, 10-11. All subsequent jihadist writings have been downloaded from al-Maqdisi's website, [www.tawhed.ws](http://www.tawhed.ws), unless stated otherwise.

8 Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, “Al-Zaraqawi - Munasaha wa-Munasara,” pp. 3-5.

9 Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, *Waqafat ma`a Thamrat al-Jihad*, 2004.

in which he specifically criticized his former pupil's indiscriminate attacks against civilians and Shi`a in Iraq as being contrary to Islamic law and detrimental to the image of Islam.<sup>10</sup> This criticism was confirmed by al-Maqdisi in several media appearances in which he voiced his concerns again.<sup>11</sup> Al-Maqdisi's criticism of al-Zaraqawi prompted the latter to write a rebuttal of his former teacher's arguments. One of al-Zaraqawi's points was that al-Maqdisi was not well-informed about the situation in Iraq and al-Qa`ida's actions in the country.<sup>12</sup>

The argument that al-Maqdisi lacks “jihad experience” lowered al-Maqdisi's stature in the eyes of some Jordanian jihadis. Moreover, several people were clearly offended that such a man had shown only lukewarm support for jihadist missions and had even criticized al-Zaraqawi, who embodied their image of a tough and fearless fighter, particularly after his death as a “martyr” in Iraq in 2006. When al-Maqdisi was once again released from prison in March 2008, criticism of his jihad deficit quickly returned.

### Criticizing Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi

Since al-Maqdisi's release from jail, several pamphlets and booklets began circulating in Jordan criticizing him for his lack of jihadist credentials. The authors of these writings often do not attack al-Maqdisi directly but mostly concentrate on a fellow Jordanian Salafi-jihadi, Nur al-Din Bayram. The latter is

10 Ibid.; Al-Maqdisi, “Al-Zaraqawi - Munasaha wa-Munasara,” pp. 8-12.

11 See, for example, Muwaffaq Kamal, “Al-Maqdisi li-l-Ghad': Ana Ibn al-Tayyar al-Salafi al-Jihadi wa-la Atabarra'u minhu,” *al-Ghad*, July 5, 2005; Luqman Iskandar, “Al-Murshid al-Ruhi al-Sabiq li-'Abu Mus`ab al-Zaraqawi' Yantaqidu A`malahu fi l-'Iraq,” *al-'Arab al-Yawm*, July 5, 2005; Yasir Abu Hilala, “Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi: Al-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya,” *al-Jazira*, July 6, 2005. For more comprehensive accounts of the conflict between al-Zaraqawi and al-Maqdisi in 2005, see 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; Nibras Kazimi, “A Virulent Ideology in Mutation: Zaraqawi Upstages Maqdisi,” in Fradkin, Haqqani and Brown eds., *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 2 (2005): pp. 59-73.

12 Abu Mus`ab al-Zaraqawi, “Bayan wa-Tawdih lamma Atharahu l-Shaykh al-Maqdisi fi Liqa`ihi ma`a Qanat al-Jazira,” undated. This communiqué began appearing on the internet in early July 2005.

described as someone who traveled to Iraq to participate in the fighting but returned without having fought.<sup>13</sup> One of the authors of these critical writings addresses him sarcastically as “the hero Nur” and attacks him by mentioning religious texts stating that it is forbidden to flee from the battlefield.<sup>14</sup> Bayram further incurred the wrath of his critics by writing a book—to which al-Maqdisi wrote the introduction—in which he accused certain people of deviance in excommunicating other Muslims (*takfir*).<sup>15</sup> Interpreting this book as an attack on them, al-Maqdisi’s critics challenged Bayram to come up with the names of “deviant” people and stated that al-Maqdisi fled away from jihad “with false arguments and lies.”<sup>16</sup>

Aware of these accusations, al-Maqdisi, together with more than 20 other Jordanian Salafi-jihadis (including Bayram), published a communiqué in which they specifically mentioned the writings cited above and distanced themselves from this “small group of extremists” whose “false ideas are in accordance with the creed of the Kharijites.”<sup>17</sup> Although the critical writings mostly concentrate on accusing Bayram and al-Maqdisi of detracting jihadis in spite of their own lack of jihad experience, their response does

not address this accusation. It focuses solely on the issue of extremism in *takfir*.

In early 2009, the conflict started again, this time on internet forums. A user by the name of “al-Mihdar” accused al-Maqdisi of using an article on his website without naming its source. Although the discussion that followed briefly concentrated on this relatively minor issue,<sup>18</sup> it quickly returned to the more contentious question of al-Maqdisi’s jihadist credentials. This was expressed most specifically in a book posted on a forum entitled *The Truth of the Conflict between al-Maqdisi and the Heirs of al-Zarqawi is Jihad for the Cause of God*. In this book and the reactions to it by other participants on the forum, al-Maqdisi is repeatedly criticized for refusing to endorse certain jihadist operations, for not participating in any armed combat and for criticizing others who do.<sup>19</sup>

While the criticisms sometimes misrepresent al-Maqdisi’s ideology,<sup>20</sup> they do point to the fact that al-Maqdisi does indeed have a jihad deficit and assert that the only people who can speak authoritatively about jihad are those who have taken part in it, a growing sentiment also heard among other jihadis.<sup>21</sup> The person

most responsible for emphasizing this point is Abu Qudama Salih al-Hami, a Jordanian journalist and al-Zarqawi’s brother-in-law. Abu Qudama has written several books in which he attacks al-Maqdisi, mostly for his lack of jihadist credentials.<sup>22</sup> One of these books is actually a “critical and methodological study” of al-Maqdisi’s *Waqafat ma`a Thamrat al-Jihad*, the book in which the latter scolded jihadis for their mistakes. Abu Qudama repeatedly states that al-Maqdisi has never waged jihad himself and has never belonged to the mujahidin and consequently knows little about them. In spite of this, Abu Qudama asserts, al-Maqdisi treats mujahidin with disdain and looks down upon their actions and views.<sup>23</sup>

When al-Maqdisi tried to refute these critics, he once again failed to address the issue most prominent in the writings of his opponents: his jihad deficit. He again refers to his critics as extremists in *takfir* and equates their attacks on him with accusations of ideological revisionism, despite the fact that their writings deal with more than just these issues.<sup>24</sup> He accuses his critics of misunderstanding his writings and falsely claiming that he has changed his views.<sup>25</sup> It seems obvious why al-Maqdisi uses this tactic: knowing that he has not revised his views and that some of his critics do indeed misrepresent his writings,<sup>26</sup> he

13 Muntadayat Bayt al-Maqdis al-Jihadiyya, “Haqiqat Nur Bayram (Abu `Abd al-Rahman) al-Farar min al-Jihad,” www.al-amanh.net, undated; Abu I-Qa`qa` al-Shami, “Kalimat `Itab,” undated, p. 2.

14 Al-Yaman `Abd al-Karim b. `Isa al-Madani, “Al-Ijtihad fi Hukm al-Farar min al-Sahat al-Jihad,” available at Shabakat Midad al-Suyuf, “Hamal Kutub al-Ijtihad fi Hukm al-Farar min Sahat al-Jihad,” www.almedad.com, undated.

15 Nur al-Din Bayram, *Fasl al-Maqal fi Hajar Ahl al-Bida` wa-l-Dalal*, 2008.

16 Abu I-Qa`qa` al-Shami, “Kalimat `Itab”; Abu I-Qasim al-Muhajir, “Al-Maqdisi Yataqaddamu li-l-Wara’,” undated, available on Shabakat Ana Muslim li-l-Hiwar al-Islami, “Kitab al-Maqdisi Yataqaddamu li-l-Wara’,” www.muslim.net, undated.

17 “Bara’a min Fi’at al-Dalal Ghulat al-Takfir wa-Mu`taqidatihim al-Za’igha,” 2008. The communiqué was posted on various webforums, such as www.al-hesbah.info, but also on www.tawhed.ws. The “Kharijites” label refers to a group of early-Islamic dissenters who disagreed with the fourth caliph `Ali and left (*kharaja*, hence the name Kharijites) the community of Muslims. Due to their strict views on what constitutes unbelief and willingness to support their claims with intra-Islamic violence, the Kharijites are often seen as Islam’s first group of extremists.

18 Muntadayat al-Buraq al-Islamiyya, “Al-Sayf al-Battar fi l-Tahdir min al-Mihdar,” www.alboraqforum.info, accessed on May 27, 2009; Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, “Radd al-Shaykh al-Maqdisi `ala Su`alat Muntada Midad al-Suyuf,” 2009; Muntadayat al-Falluja al-Islamiyya, “Ikhwani: Irju al-Tawaqquf wa-l-Tahadduth `an ayy Shay’ Yata`allaqu bi-Midad al-Suyuf,” www.al-falloja.info, accessed on May 27, 2009; Shabakat Midad al-Suyuf, “Nida’ ila l-Shaykhayn al-Maqdisi wa-l-Mihdar min Ibnikuma Ibn al-Zubayr,” www.almedad.com, accessed on April 21, 2009.

19 Shabakat Midad al-Suyuf, “Haqiqat al-Khilaf bayna l-Maqdisi wa-Warathat al-Zarqawi huwa l-Jihad fi Sabil Allah,” www.almedad.com, accessed on March 3, 2009. The author of the book is Abu Qudama Salih al-Hami.

20 One post wrongly states, for example, that al-Maqdisi believes jihad to be the solution for all the Muslim community’s problems. For a more detailed treatment of al-Maqdisi’s ideology, see Joas Wagemakers, “A Purist Jihadi-Salafi: The Ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 36:2 (2009): pp. 283-299.

21 See Reuven Paz, “The Youth are Older: The Iraqization of the Somali Mujahidin Youth Movement,” PRISM Occasional Papers, December 2008, pp. 8-9; Eli Alshech, “The Emergence of the ‘Infallible Jihad Fighter’ - The Salafi Jihadists’ Quest for Religious Legitimacy,” Middle East Media Research Institute, June 2008.

22 These books include *Fursan al-Farida al-Gha’iba - Al-Zarqawi wa-l-Jihad al-Afghan*, 2007, and *Al-Zarqawi: Al-Jil al-Thani li-l-Qa`ida - Dirasa Manhajiyya wa-Naqdiyya*, 2008.

23 Abu Qudama Salih al-Hami, *Waqafat ma`a Thamrat al-Jihad - Dirasa Manhajiyya wa-Naqdiyya*, 2009, pp. 6, 8.

24 Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, “As’ila Hawl Iftira’at Mansuba li-l-Shaykh Abi Muhammad al-Maqdisi,” 2008.

25 Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, “(Al-Lughu fi l-Din) min Asalib al-Kuffar fi l-Kayd li-l-Da`wa wa-l-Du`at al-Yusharikuhum fihī Kathir min al-Hamqa wa-l-Mughfalin,” 2009, pp. 4-7. Others have also defended al-Maqdisi. See, for example, Shabakat Midad al-Suyuf, “Bayan min Abu Majid Muhammad b. `Abdallah al-Mas`ari,” www.almedad.com, accessed on April 21, 2009; Abu Hammam Bakr b. `Abd al-`Aziz al-Athari, “Al-Sayf al-Muhannad fi Munasarat Abi Muhammad,” 2008; Abu Hammam Bakr b. `Abd al-`Aziz al-Athari, *Al-Qawl al-Narjisi bi-`Idalat Shaykhina al-Maqdisi*, www.ansar-jihad.net, 2009.

26 Abu Qudama, for example, states that al-Maqdisi considers jihad to be “a danger (*mablaka*),” which is clearly a superficial reading of al-Maqdisi’s much more nuanced

clearly feels confident addressing those accusations because they are easily refuted. The much more damaging charge that he has never actually fought in a jihad himself, however, is far more difficult to parry, simply because it is true. Although al-Maqdisi is a scholar who considers himself only responsible for *da`wa* and therefore does not see a contradiction between his calls for jihad and his own absence from the battlefield, he does seem to feel the need to address his jihad deficit somehow. To accomplish this, al-Maqdisi—just as his critics do to underline their attacks against him—invokes the person whom his opponents consider as their jihadist hero: Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi.

### Invoking Zarqawi

Al-Maqdisi's critics underscore their attack on his jihad deficit by juxtaposing him with his former pupil. Knowing that al-Zarqawi represents exactly what al-Maqdisi lacks, they use the former as a symbol of heroic jihadism. One author remarked that al-Maqdisi, instead of giving al-Zarqawi "help and advice" (*munasara wa-munasaba*, the title of al-Maqdisi's letter to al-Zarqawi), he caused him "humiliation and disclosure" (*mufadaha wa-mukashafa*). The author further stated that al-Zarqawi "was a true man of jihad" while "his old friend al-Maqdisi" spoke ill of him, "and that was a huge difference between the two personalities."<sup>27</sup> Nobody invokes al-Zarqawi more than his brother-in-law Abu Qudama, whose writings are often cited on internet forums to attack al-Maqdisi. He dedicated his critical study of al-Maqdisi's *Waqafat ma`a Thamrat al-Jihad* to "the martyr and sole leader Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, through whom God raised the banner of Islam high."<sup>28</sup> He further turned al-Maqdisi's call to let knowledgeable people decide on how to wage jihad against him by stating that al-Maqdisi does not know the reality of jihad and should therefore leave this to others, first and foremost to al-Zarqawi.<sup>29</sup> He even criticized al-

Maqdisi for spending so much time in Pakistan writing and printing one of his books, stating that if al-Maqdisi had waged jihad instead, he would have remembered "the names of the martyrs," just as al-Zarqawi did.<sup>30</sup>

Probably realizing that al-Zarqawi possessed what he himself lacked, al-Maqdisi seems to portray himself as having been close to al-Zarqawi. He stresses that he was in prison with him and that the people who signed the communiqué criticizing the so-called Kharijites are actually the people who knew al-Zarqawi better than anyone. Al-Maqdisi even goes so far as to say that if al-Zarqawi had been alive, he would have disavowed these critics.<sup>31</sup> He also states that his criticism of al-Zarqawi's actions in Iraq does not mean that he is against jihad as a whole; on the contrary, he fully supports it.<sup>32</sup>

Apart from invoking the memory of al-Zarqawi to support his case, al-Maqdisi has also recently written the introductions to two books by al-Zarqawi's former spiritual guide in Iraq, Abu Anas al-Shami. Al-Maqdisi, however, usually only writes introductions to books about subjects that are close to his own ideas.<sup>33</sup> While it may be a coincidence, the timing of these introductions as well as the fact that he chose al-Shami's books on Sufism and the Shi`a<sup>34</sup>—subjects on which al-Maqdisi has written virtually nothing—could suggest that he has consciously made the decision to connect his name to that of al-Zarqawi's mufti in Iraq, perhaps hoping to strengthen the now much-needed ties with his former pupil.

### Conclusion

The conflict between al-Maqdisi and the admirers of al-Zarqawi shows that radical religious scholars are not necessarily beyond criticism and that invoking a dead jihadist can be a powerful tool in criticizing others. This is significant for several reasons. First, it shows that religious authority is not the only important credential in the eyes of jihadists. Given the right conditions, it can apparently be trumped by what one might call "jihadist authority." Second, it confirms the worrying trend among jihadists to see themselves as capable of deciding what is legitimate in combat, irrespective of what their scholars think. This is not to suggest that radical ideologues such as al-Maqdisi are soft on their "infidel" enemies, but they at least take the rulings of Islamic law into account, which keeps them from supporting a no-holds-barred type of warfare. The fighters themselves seem to have less patience for such legal niceties, potentially leading to greater bloodshed. It is this prospect, which goes beyond invocations of al-Zarqawi, that should most worry policymakers.

*Joas Wagemakers is a lecturer and Ph.D.-candidate at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. His research focuses on Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's influence on the Salafi-jihadi movement. He is co-editor of ZemZem, a Dutch-language journal on the Middle East, North Africa and Islam and has published several articles on al-Maqdisi, Salafism and Islamism, including "Defining the Enemy: Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's Radical Reading of Surat al-Mumtabana" in Die Welt des Islams (December 2008), and "Framing the 'Threat to Islam': Al-Wala' wa-l-Bara' in Salafi Discourse" in Arab Studies Quarterly (Fall 2008).*

views. See Abu Qudama Salih al-Hami, *Waqafat ma`a Thamrat al-Jihad - Dirasa Manhajiyya wa-Naqdiyya*, p. 224.

27 Shabakat Midad al-Suyuf, "Haqiqat al-Khilaf bayna l-Maqdisi wa-Warathat al-Zarqawi huwa l-Jihad fi Sabil Allah," www.almedad.com, accessed on March 3, 2009.

28 Abu Qudama Salih al-Hami, "Waqafat ma`a Thamrat al-Jihad - Dirasa Manhajiyya wa-Naqdiyya," p. 1.

29 Ibid., pp. 25-26.

30 Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, *Al-Zarqawi: Al-Jil al-Thani li-l-Qa`ida - Dirasa Manhajiyya wa-Naqdiyya*, p. 170.

31 Al-Maqdisi, "As'ila hawl Iftira'at Mansuba li-l-Shaykh Abi Muhammad al-Maqdisi."

32 Al-Maqdisi, "(Al-Lughu fi l-Din) min Asalib al-Kuffar fi l-Kayd li-l-Da`wa wa-l-Du`at Yusharikuhum fih Kathir min al-Hamqa wa-l-Mughfalin," pp. 5-7.

33 Examples include his introduction to Nur al-Din Bayram's book mentioned earlier and Abu Qatada al-Filastini, *Ju`nat al-Mutayyibin*, 2000.

34 The books are Abu Anas al-Shami, *Al-Sufiyya*, 2009 and Abu Anas al-Shami, *Al-Shi`a*, 2009.