

The Dangerous Ideas of the Neo-Zarqawist Movement

By Murad Batal al-Shishani

ON JUNE 4, 2009, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi gave his first interview since his release from a Jordanian prison in March 2008. Considered the ideological defender of the overall Salafi-jihadi movement, al-Maqdisi admitted that there are now competing views among Salafi-jihadis in Jordan.¹ His confirmation of tension within the movement came in response to an escalating dispute between al-Maqdisi and his followers on one side, and on the other a splinter movement of Salafi-jihadis known as the “neo-Zarqawists.” The neo-Zarqawists are a small group of ideological radicals who consider themselves the heirs of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi’s legacy. Although al-Maqdisi is considered the spiritual mentor of al-Zarqawi, the two grew apart in mid-2005 when al-Maqdisi criticized al-Qa`ida in Iraq’s (AQI) tactics.

The differences within the Salafi-jihadi movement are significant because it is rare for an established Salafi-jihadi authority—in this case Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi—to be criticized and challenged for his writings and ideological position within his own base. This ongoing rift among the Salafi-jihadi community threatens to draw in a younger generation of militant youth—who idolize al-Zarqawi for his aggressive tactics—intent on pursuing al-Zarqawi’s legacy of spreading Salafi-jihadi violence into the Levant region.

This article provides a brief background on the growing tension among the Salafi-jihadi community in Jordan, identifies the leaders of the neo-Zarqawist movement, and shows that al-Zarqawi’s legacy may translate into an increase of terrorist plots and violence in the Levant and greater Middle East region.

Background

Differences between Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi first appeared in mid-2005, when the latter sent an open letter to al-Zarqawi in Iraq entitled “Advocacy and Advice.” The letter asked AQI to refrain from targeting Iraqi Shi`a and Christian civilians.² Al-Maqdisi also stressed the importance of allowing Iraqis to hold the leadership reins in Iraq. Al-Zarqawi responded to the letter by highlighting that its message harmed the overall “jihad in Iraq.” Since that incident, divisions appeared between al-Maqdisi’s and al-Zarqawi’s followers, and they have resulted in a growing gap within the Salafi-jihadi movement.

Today, a portion of the Salafi-jihadi community that agrees with al-Zarqawi’s actions and tactics in Iraq continue to criticize al-Maqdisi directly, and they warn other established Salafi-jihadi leaders and clerics against continuing to follow al-Maqdisi.³ In response, al-Maqdisi and other established Salafi-jihadi leaders have warned their followers against promoting the views of the neo-Zarqawists, who they call “deviants.”

The Neo-Zarqawists

The neo-Zarqawist movement identifies itself as the heirs of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi’s legacy. This legacy can best be defined as inducing sectarian warfare and attempting to spread jihadist ideas into the Levant, rather than confining jihad to Iraq or Afghanistan. Importantly, al-Zarqawi’s “heirs” also ignore the decrees and opinions of senior Salafi-jihadi clerics and leaders, most evident through their ongoing criticisms of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. Their decision to directly challenge leading Salafi-jihadi clerics shows why this movement is less predictable and potentially more violent; it marks a fragmentation of the established Salafi-jihadi order. As stated by Joas Wagemakers, “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.”⁴ The majority of neo-Zarqawist writings can be found at the Midad al-Sayouf forum.⁵

The primary leaders of the movement are al-Zarqawi’s brother-in-law, Abu Qudama, and Abu Harith al-Mihdhar. These two individuals are best described as ideological leaders because they are not involved in actual jihadist operations. Nevertheless, their ties to al-Zarqawi and criticisms of established Salafi-jihadi leaders in a public forum are threatening because they could further incite militants to resume and prolong al-Zarqawi’s legacy of spreading violence throughout the Levant. This was partially confirmed in October 2008 when Jihad al-Qashih, a militant who was active operationally in the field with al-Zarqawi, expressed support for the movement in a letter he wrote from a prison cell, presumably in Syria.⁶

Abu Qudama Salih al-Hami’s real name is Sati Qasrawi. He is a Jordanian national and worked as *Jihad Magazine’s* correspondent in Afghanistan during the jihad against the Soviet Union in the 1980s.⁷ He lost his leg there in a landmine explosion.⁸ He is married to al-Zarqawi’s sister and currently lives in Jordan.

Al-Mihdhar’s real name is Abu Abu’l-Harith al-Mihdhar al-Shazli al-Hasani al-Sharif.⁹ He is an Egyptian national who studied at al-Azhar University in Cairo, Umm al-Qura University in Mecca

4 Joas Wagemakers, “Invoking Zarqawi: Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi’s Jihad Deficit,” *CTC Sentinel* 2:6 (2009).

5 See for example, www.almedad.com/vb/showthread.php?t=10859, www.almedad.com/vb/showthread.php?t=11996 and www.almedad.com/vb/showthread.php?t=12343. Supporters of al-Maqdisi, in turn, created a forum that they named Shoumoukh al-Islam (Glory of Islam).

6 It is not clear when he was arrested, but the first reference of his detention was in February 2007 in a report by the Arab Organization for Human Rights of Jordan.

7 *Jihad Magazine* was a bi-monthly magazine founded by Abdullah Azzam in 1984. It was the major media source for the Afghan mujahidin at the time.

8 See his participation in al-Jazira’s documentary about al-Zarqawi on July 1, 2004. This is available at www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/930C50BF-DF09-4597-9A24-18E23556F266.htm.

9 Iman al-Qahtani, “Sijal Bayanat bayn Islamiyye London,” al-Arabiya, February 12, 2009.

2 Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, “Al-Zarqawi – Munasaha wa-Munasara,” available at www.tawhed.ws/r?i=dtwiam56.

3 These leaders include Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Jarrah al-Qaddah, Abu Abdallah Riyalat, Abu Saraqa al-Faqih, among others.

1 *Al-Sabeel*, June 4, 2009.

and studied Deoband in Pakistan.¹⁰ He moved to London at an unknown point and founded the Midad al-Sayouf Forum. He also allegedly created the Thabitoun ala al-Ahd (Abiding by our Oath) site¹¹ for Muhammad Khalil al-Hakaymah,¹² a dissident jihadist leader who joined al-Qa`ida.¹³

Once Jihad al-Qashih joined the campaign against al-Maqdisi in 2008, it became clear that individuals with military experience are supporting the more radical neo-Zarqawist movement. Al-Qashih's real name is Ibrahim

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Muhammad Abdul-Thahir Zain al-`Abidin.¹⁴ He is often described on jihadist forums as the “hero of Falluja” due to his experience fighting with al-Zarqawi in Anbar Province in 2004. Currently, he is believed to be in a Syrian prison, from where he wrote the 2008 letter criticizing al-Maqdisi. His long letter was posted on jihadist websites, especially the sites popular among neo-Zarqawists.

Al-Qashih appears to have been instrumental to al-Zarqawi's Levantine strategy, as he allegedly attempted to

carry out terrorist attacks in Jordan, one of which was believed directed by al-Zarqawi himself. He remains wanted in Jordan, most famously for an assassination attempt against U.S. archaeologists in that country in April 2004.¹⁵ He was also tried in absentia for involvement in the “chemical cell,” which was a plot to blow up Jordan's General Intelligence building in 2004. The plot was headed by Azmi al-Jayousi and organized by al-Zarqawi, who was leading AQI at the time.¹⁶

Still a Fringe Movement

The neo-Zarqawists are not scholars or clerics. As a result, they lack the theoretical approach that characterizes the writings of al-Maqdisi and other established theorists. The neo-Zarqawist writings are almost solely based on personal criticism of al-Maqdisi. They also criticize al-Maqdisi's lack of “jihadist credentials” since, unlike al-Zarqawi, he has never been involved in actual combat.¹⁷ The neo-Zarqawists' beliefs are even more radical than al-Maqdisi and the established Salafi-jihadi theorists. For example, they oppose al-Maqdisi because he refused to declare that all Shi`a are non-believers. The neo-Zarqawists refuse to criticize suicide bombings,¹⁸ they pursue *takfiri* ideology, and charge Jordan's Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs with blasphemy for its role in controlling mosques.

Although a potentially dangerous movement, it has not yet been accepted by the mainstream Salafi-jihadi movement.¹⁹ This is due to the fact that the heirs of al-Zarqawi and others that pursue his more expansive ideology lack the credentials of the established Salafi-jihadi scholars and clerics. Moreover, as recently as January 14, 2009, Usama bin Ladin praised Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's website, Manbar al-Jihad

wal-Tawhid, providing legitimacy to al-Maqdisi's agenda.²⁰ Nevertheless, the neo-Zarqawist movement remains concerning as it could attract energetic youth, who may be less prone to rigidly follow the dictates of al-Maqdisi and more attracted to al-Zarqawi's infamous legacy in Iraq.

Terrorism Spreading into the Levant

The possibility of other active militants pursuing the neo-Zarqawist ideology is concerning as it would result in more terrorist violence in the Levant. Although al-Zarqawi was killed on June 7, 2006 in a U.S. missile strike, he left an enduring mark on the region. His legacy is partly defined by his attempt to spread jihadist violence into the more stable states of the Levant—most vividly witnessed in the 2005 Amman hotel bombings. His goal was to liberate Palestine after the battle was concluded in Iraq. In December 2005, for example, al-Zarqawi claimed responsibility for launching missiles at northern Israel.²¹

From the establishment of his military training camp in Afghanistan's Herat Province in 2000 through his violent activities in Iraq until his 2006 death, al-Zarqawi influenced a number of jihadists, many of whom were from the Levant region.²² Al-Zarqawi wanted to create an “al-Qa`ida in the Levant” organization, and he sought to establish organizational and ideological links between his AQI movement and other jihadist cells in the Levant.

Since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Jordan has seen a significant increase in the number of foiled terrorist plots. During the period of 1991-2003, for example, Jordanian courts ruled in 10 large cases related to Salafi-jihadis. From 2003-2008, however, that number more than doubled to 22.²³ Most of the cases were at least partly linked to either Iraq, Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi or AQI. Al-Zarqawi himself was personally tried in absentia in four of the 22 cases, while six cases were linked to him by one of his operatives

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The website is currently defunct. Its URL used to be located at www.altabetoon.eur.st.

¹² Al-Hakaymah is one of Egyptian Jama`a al-Islamiyya's leaders who claimed that the group joined al-Qa`ida, creating al-Qa`ida's “Egyptian branch” in 2006. Jama`a al-Islamiyya denied his claim, however. Al-Hakaymah is supposedly based in Afghanistan.

¹³ Al-Qahtani.

¹⁴ “Al-Rad Ala`a al-Maqdisi fi Tholmeh Il Zarqawi,” published on several jihadist web forums in October 2008. It is still available at www.muslim.net/vb/showthread.php?t=312502.

¹⁵ In April 2004, Jordanian security foiled an attempt to attack four American anthropologists who were working in Irbid (northern Jordan). Al-Qashih was one of the ringleaders in this attempt, along with Jamil Kotkot. See *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 6, 2006.

¹⁶ *Al-Sabeel*, January 11, 2005.

¹⁷ For more on these compare-and-contrast criticisms, see Wagemakers.

¹⁸ Al-Hami.

¹⁹ For example, there was strong criticism from al-Faloja users, many of whom demanded the closure of Midad al-Sayouf.

²⁰ Usama bin Ladin, audio recording, January 14, 2009.

²¹ *Daily Star*, December 20, 2005; *Jerusalem Post*, December 30, 2005.

²² Fouad Husain, *Al-Zarqawi: al-Jeel al-Thani Il Qaida* (Amman: Dar al-Khayal Publication, 2005).

²³ These numbers were derived from the author's review of all Jordanian cases since 1991.

or relatives.²⁴ In eight cases, the major charge was “planning to travel to Iraq to fight Americans.”²⁵ Although not all of the 22 cases were connected to al-Zarqawi or AQI, they demonstrate the worrying spread of Salafi-jihadi ideals into the Levant.

Some of the Jordanian court cases established links between Jordanian jihadists and other militants in the Levant region. Shakir al-Khatib, for example, is the leader of a group on trial in Jordan charged with plotting to blow up Christian churches and attacking a Lebanese choir in July 2008.²⁶ He was not trained in Jordan, however, but instead in the Ain al-Hilwah Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. According to the indictment, he allegedly pledged *bay`at* (oath of loyalty) to al-Qa`ida and wanted to fight in Iraq.²⁷ In 2005, the Khatab Brigades was a group seeking to fight in Iraq and to also implement terrorist attacks in Jordan.²⁸ Another example is of two leading Salafi-jihadi leaders in the Ain al-Hilwah refugee camp who were tried in absentia in Jordan: Usama al-Shihabi (Abu al-Zahra) and Haytham al-Saadi (Abu Tariq). Al-Shihabi was the leader of Jund al-Sham in Lebanon, an organization supposedly founded by al-Zarqawi himself when he was in Afghanistan’s Herat Province.²⁹ Al-Saadi is the brother of Asbat al-Ansar leader Abu Muhjin.³⁰

Another effect of al-Zarqawi’s legacy is his impact on the Palestinian diaspora in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Socio-political conditions in Palestinian refugee camps in these countries play an important role in increasing the influence of al-Zarqawi’s ideology. Jordan’s Irbid camp, for example, is close to the Syrian border and has emerged as a crossing point for Salafi-jihadis heading to Iraq or Lebanon, as seen through evidence

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 *Al-Hayat*, January 28, 2009.

27 Ibid.; Also see Murad Batal al-Shishani, “Al-Zarqawi’s Legacy Seen in Trial of Jordanian al-Qaeda Cell,” *Terrorism Focus* 6:4 (2009).

28 *Al-Ghad*, December 7, 2005; *Jordan Times*, September 14, 2006.

29 “Tantheem Jund al-Sham Bada’ ma’a al-Zarqawi fi Afghanistan w Antaqal Beza’amt Abu Yousof ila Mukhaim A’in al-Hilweh,” *Asbarq al-Awsat*, May 25, 2007.

30 “Al-Zarqawi Yoa’in Abu Muhjin al-Mutarad al-Falastini Qaedan Maydanyan,” *Elaph*, August 16, 2005.

uncovered during the ongoing trials of Salafi-jihadis in Jordan.

Jihad al-Qashih was originally from the Irbid camp, as was Suleiman Ghayyad al-Anjadi, who was killed by Jordanian authorities after an armed confrontation in 2007. Al-Anjadi was accused of attempting to help Azmi al-Jayousi—who was sent to Jordan by al-Zarqawi to lead the 2004 chemical cell—escape from prison with the help of other militants. Al-Anjadi is also accused of plotting to assassinate U.S. President George W. Bush during his visit to Jordan in 2006.

Conclusion

Despite his death in 2006, Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi’s legacy lives on. His speeches and tactics have influenced militants in the Levant. Just as worrying, his so-called “heirs” continue to promote his legacy on jihadist web forums. The neo-Zarqawist movement has been able to mobilize and attract supporters despite its lack of a “legitimate” ideology when compared to Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and his followers.

Al-Zarqawi’s followers are even more radical than al-Maqdisi and the other established Salafi-jihadi theorists because they are pursuing a more unrestrained form of warfare. If his legacy gains further traction among the Salafi-jihadi community, it could mean a rise in terrorist plots in the relatively stable Levant region.

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The July 17 Jakarta Suicide Attacks and the Death of Noordin Top

By Noor Huda Ismail

ON JULY 17, 2009, two suicide bombers struck the JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels in Jakarta, Indonesia, killing seven people. Indonesian authorities are still investigating the attacks and have not yet compiled enough evidence to know the exact parties responsible. Speculation, however, fell on Noordin Mohamed Top, a militant who led a faction of the al-Qa`ida-linked Jemaah Islamiya (JI) terrorist group.¹ The hotel bombings shocked Indonesia because conditions in the country have been relatively peaceful since the last attack by Noordin’s group in Bali in 2005. In the 2005 attack, three bombs struck two tourist areas, killing at least 26 people, among them foreign nationals.²

Since 2002, Indonesian authorities have managed to arrest most of JI’s senior members. More importantly, they have succeeded in gleaning information about the JI network and ideology from interrogations. Authorities have also confiscated a significant amount of JI’s explosives material, and they have foiled various plots, such as an attempt to blow up a café frequented by Western tourists in Bukittinggi, West Sumatra in 2008 and the planned assassination of a foreign national there.³ Most significantly, after nearly seven frustrating years of near misses and false leads, Indonesian authorities finally managed to kill Noordin Top on September 17 at the end of a bloody nine-hour siege in Central Java.⁴ Despite Noordin’s death, JI, and especially the remaining members of Noordin’s pro-bombing faction, remains a threat to Indonesian security.

1 Jemaah Islamiya is no longer a cohesive organization with a unified leadership structure. Divisions appeared in the group after the first Bali bombing in 2002. Noordin’s faction is the only group in Indonesia that has conducted suicide attacks.

2 “Bali Bomb Attacks Claim 26 Lives,” BBC, October 2, 2005.

3 International Crisis Group, “Indonesia: Radicalisation of the Palembang Group,” May 20, 2009.

4 “Indonesian Police: DNA Proves It Was Noordin,” *Jakarta Globe*, September 18, 2009.