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The Jihadi Forums: An Open Forum with Abu Abdullah Al-Maqdisi

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Preface

The online Jihadi community constitutes, without a doubt, a central component in the Jihadi propaganda array and is an important target audience for the consumption of messages from Al-Qaeda's leadership and other Jihadi organizations.[1]

One of the main means for the distribution of the ideology of Salafi-Jihadi Sheikhs, and to strengthen the ties between the surfer and the Jihadi forum, is found in the allocation of an open forum for surfers for a predetermined period of time (usually several days), through which they get the rare opportunity to address questions on various subjects directly to a senior Salafi-Jihadi Sheikh, who is a guest at the forum. After closing the open forum, the hosting forum publishes an electronic booklet containing most of the surfers' questions and the Sheikh's answers.

This document will focus on such an "open forum" with **Sheikh Abu Abdullah Al-Maqdisi**, who has already indicated the importance of the propaganda of the Jihadi forums.[2]

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[1] There are several research papers pointing to the fact that various Jihad organizations have identified the great potential of the internet in general and of Jihadi forums in particular, as potential prolific grounds for the recruitment of activists to their ranks. See for example: "Training Jihad activists via the internet", ICT's Jihadi websites Monitoring Group, 24 April 2009:
http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/0/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWMG_Training_Jihad_Vi a_the_Internet.pdf.

[2] However, one can also detect criticism on the limited scope of propaganda the Jihadi forums have provided in this regard, see: "The answers of Sheikh Abu Abdullah Al-Maqdisi: The Sharia Officer of the Fatah Al-Islam Organization", the Al-Shumukh forum, March 2009, p. 36.

An Open Forum with Sheikh Abu Abdullah Al-Maqdisi

Sheikh Abu Abdullah Al-Maqdisi apparently resides today in Jordan, but this information has no official corroboration. Details on him are very scarce, and as far as we know, he serves as the Sharia officer of the Lebanese "Fatah Al-Islam" Salafi-Jihadi organization, an Al-Qaeda branch in Lebanon founded at the end of 2006. This organization gained its reputation during the fierce battles in May 2007 against the Lebanese Army in the Tripoli area of northern Lebanon and at the "Nahr Al-Bared" refugee camp on the outskirts of the city, whilst trying to establish an Islamic Emirate there.[3]

At the beginning of March 2009, the "Al-Shumukh" Jihadi forum allocated an open forum to surfers to address questions to the Salafi-Jihadi Sheikh Abu Abdullah Al-Maqdisi. In May 2009 the aforementioned forum published a 62 page booklet entitled: "The Answers of Sheikh Abu Abdullah Al-Maqdisi: The Sharia Officer of the Fatah Al-Islam Organization", containing a collection of the question posed by the forum members, and the Sheikh's answers.[4]

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[3] For more information on the organization, see: Tine Gade, *Fatah Al-Islam in Lebanon: Between global and local jihad*, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), 5 December 2007: http://www.mil.no/multimedia/archive/00102/02727_102478a.pdf.
[4] http://shamikh.org/vb/showthread.php?s=0208d09e8d9a8843aa71cead405255c1&t=36675

**The cover of the booklet
containing the Sheikh's answers
to the Al-Shumukh forum surfers**

In the introduction to the booklet, Al-Maqdisi chose to plead with the Mujahideen in particular, and with his readers in general, to be patient towards their Muslim brothers and not to judge them just because their interpretation of the religious sources was not compatible with their own views. According to him there may be several directions in which sources may be interpreted, contributing to a truer illumination of a particular religious issue.

After this introduction, Al-Maqdisi says he chose to first relate the background of the establishment of the "Fatah Al-Islam" organization and its characteristics, and later on would address the various geo-political challenges facing the organization. According to him, he chose to provide an extensive background due

to the many questions posed by the forum members surrounding the inception of the organization. After presenting this background Abu Abdullah Al-Maqdisi goes on to focus on more specific questions posed by the surfers.

The Background for the Inception of the Organization

Al-Maqdisi enumerates two main stages in the formulation of the organization and connects them to Shaker Al-Absi (born in 1955) of Jordanian origin, who was the initiating figure behind the establishment of the organization.[5]

Shaker Al-Absi
(Al-Jazeera TV, 27 May 2007)

The first stage – Formulating the ideology and recruiting members, and establishing the organization's residence in Beirut.

The second stage – This was connected to external events that were out of the newly-created organization's control and were a catalyst which caused the official announcement of the establishment of the organization. The Second Lebanon War and Syria's volatile policy due to its courtship of America were two main

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[5] In one of Al-Maqdisi's answers to the surfers' questions, Al-Absi is described as a pleasant man, who refused the advances of political and partisan entities, see: "The answers of Sheikh Abu Abdullah Al-Maqdisi: The Sharia Officer of the Fatah Al-Islam Organization", the Al-Shumukh forum, March 2009, pp. 27-28.

causes affecting Al-Absi's decision to act quickly and declare the foundation of the Fatah Al-Islam organization.

Al-Maqdisi, in fact, provides a lot of information in the booklet's introduction on Al-Absi's persona, depicting him as a very active figure.[6] For example, he is said to have fought in various arenas such as Nicaragua and in Ouzo in Libya. According to Al-Maqdisi, Al-Absi studied at the Aviation College in England and Yugoslavia and later served as flight instructor in Libya, in particular on F-16s. Al-Absi is also said to have flown Yasser Arafat on April 8th 1992, a flight that ended in a crash in the Libyan Desert under unclear circumstances, from which they all survived.[7]

Later, Al-Absi became a member of a pro-Syrian organization called "Intifada",[8] operating in Lebanon. However, he was arrested and imprisoned in Syria for the planning of terrorist attacks which were intended to originate from Syria into Israeli territory, and for attempting to smuggle weapons to Jordan. In 2004 he was also sentenced to death in absentia in Jordan, due to his involvement in the murder of an American diplomat in Jordan (murdered on October 28th 2002). In the Syrian prison he began to formulate the idea of establishing a Sunni Islamic organization to carry out attacks against Jews all over the world.[9]

Al-Absi believed that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be leveraged and turned into a global inter-religious conflict, that is, between Judaism and Islam. Immediately upon his release from jail he tried to execute his plan and

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[6] For more complete biographical detail on him and the organization, see: http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/fath_al_islam.pdf
[7] "The answers of Sheikh Abu Abdullah Al-Maqdisi", p. 28.
[8] A pro-Syrian organization comprised of Fatah dissidents.
[9] In another instance, Al-Maqdisi claims that his organization has declared to be against all the Jews of the world and not only in Israel, see: "The answers of Sheikh Abu Abdullah Al-Maqdisi", p. 18.

approached the Al-Intifada organization, which was loyal to Syria. He "succeeded in persuading the organization's leadership to execute his intent and prepare the ground for a conflict with the Jews from within Lebanon. The organization agreed to this."[10]

According to Al-Maqdisi, many Muslims, both Arabs and non-Arabs, began joining the ranks of the organization, from the Arabian Peninsula, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Yemen, Libya, Syria and the Palestinian territories, in order to take part in the Jihad.[11] According to him, the organization wished its first operation to be a high standard terrorist attack against the "Zionist enemy", such as the abduction of Jews outside of Lebanon, in order to release Muslim prisoners jailed in Israel. According to him, the organization wished to dedicate this abduction as a gift to Sheikh Osama bin Laden.[12] In this regard it should be noted that Al-Maqdisi often praises Osama bin Laden and refers to him as "our Amir, our ideal and the crown on our head", and states that his eyes are alert and drink in thirstily his speeches.[13]

Al-Absi set the new organization's first residence in Beirut, but wished to later take over Tripoli and turn it into an Islamic Emirate, believing it would have a key role in the battle against the Jews. That is, that it would become a magnet for the Mujahideen who would come there in order to receive appropriate military training and it would serve as a departure base for terrorist attacks against Jewish targets and to help the Mujahideen in Iraq.[14]

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[10] Ibid, p. 6.
[11] According to him, the organization recruited fighters from various nationalities, but for some reason did not receive any fighters of Iraqi origin, Ibid, p. 13.
[12] Ibid, p. 10.
[13] Ibid, p. 29.
[14] Ibid, p. 10.

However, upon the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006, he and his men began to reasonably fear that they were exposed to significant attacks from the bombings of the Israeli air force. This fear increased especially in view of Syria's intention to ingratiate itself with the American government, and thus reduce the American pressure exerted on it, by providing them with information on secret Al-Qaeda training bases in Lebanon. In view of these developments, Al-Absi decided to move the organization's activity northwards to Tripoli, and more specifically to the "Nahr Al-Bared" refugee camp. With this move he succeeded in taking over the camp, including the weapons arsenal it contained.

At the end of 2006, the establishment of the "Fatah Al-Islam" organization was declared officially as well as its identification with the Al-Qaeda ideology. According to Al-Maqdisi, this declaration brought many of the secular leaders in Lebanon to visit Al-Absi to try to persuade him to recant his words and disassociate himself from Al-Qaeda. Al-Absi, on his part, wished to clarify that the ties between his organization and Al-Qaeda were manifested only on an ideological level, and that there was no organizational connection between the two.[15] Elsewhere, in one of his answers, he states that Al-Absi did not declare his joining of Al-Qaeda "as he knew the nation will pounce on him". According to him, such a declaration could lead to harsh retaliation on the part of the Jews and the "Muslim" governments against the organization, such as bombing its residence.[16]

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[15] Ibid, p. 6.
[16] Ibid, p. 26.

However in May 2007, six months after the establishment of Fatah Al-Islam, these aspirations were cut short due to severe fighting between Fatah Al-Islam members and the Lebanese and Syrian Armies. The Fatah Al-Islam members turned to Lebanon's Ulama, asking them to intervene in the developing crisis and remove the siege the Lebanese Army had put on the camp. However these requests were not warmly welcomed. Al-Maqdisi describes the series of battles between the parties, beginning with the battle of "Akhdod Al-Bared", and views it as one of the great crises befalling the organization. However, he views the battle as a victory, despite the fact that its outcome did not benefit the organization.[17] The unequal balance in power and equipment and the patience demonstrated by the Fatah Al-Islam members for almost four months were a significant achievement of the organization. In his words:

> "The number of soldiers of the infidel Lebanese Army is more than 30 thousand. It fought while armed with all types of weapons against the Mujahideen, whose numbers did not surpass 200, while the Mujahideen held on for four months."

Furthermore, according to him it is possible that this battle succeeded in reviving the nation's spirits and gave hope that it is possible to overcome and eradicate anti-Islamic forces.[18] It should be added that Al-Maqdisi bemoans the fact that

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[17] It is apparent that Al-Maqdisi wishes to show this battle in a nobler, more exalted light. For example, he refers to several miraculous occurrences happening to some of the organization's members during battle, such as a tank that exploded in front of one of the fighters without hurting him, or the "resurrection" of one of the fighters, believed to be dead. According to him, the greatest miracle occurring during the battle was the Mujahideen leaving the Al-Bared camp under the enemies' nose without being detected. See: Ibid, pp. 28-29.

[18] Ibid, p. 14. Al-Maqdisi praises this battle in one of his answers to the surfers' questions, see p. 27. 140 people were killed in these battles, 25 other fighters were saved, and the total number of prisoners in Lebanon belonging to the organization is 250, see p. 37.

his organization did not receive any aid or support during the fierce battles between the organization and the Lebanese security forces.[19]

**A Fatah Al-Islam operative
in Nahr Al-Bared
(Al-Arabiya, 23 May 2007)**

**The Lebanese Army attacking
Fatah Al-Islam outposts
(Al-Jazeera TV, 21 May 2007)**

The State of the Organization Today

After presenting the lengthy background on the inception of the organization, Al-Maqdisi turns to answering the surfers' questions, dealing mainly with the state of the organization and its functions today.

Al-Maqdisi says that today the organization deals with rebuilding its strength and recruiting new fighters. In addition, according to him the organization strives to avoid getting dragged into confrontations with local forces, so as not to harm its rehabilitation efforts[20] or to bring about the incarceration of its members.[21] According to him, the organization is indeed alive and kicking, but at present prefers to maintain a low profile due to the delicate situation it's in, in the face of the existing challenges.[22] Therefore, it is careful not to take responsibility for the

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[19] Ibid, p. 13.
[20] Ibid, p. 12.
[21] Ibid, p. 16.
[22] Ibid, p. 14.

launching of rockets from Lebanon into Israel this past year.[23] Thus, for example, he says:

> "We at the Fatah Al-Islam did not take upon ourselves, up till now, responsibility for any military action […], as the war against the tyrants should be a quiet war. That is, the enemy should not know who is responsible for attacking him. If the enemy finds out the identity of its attackers, he will strike them."[24]

However, Al-Maqdisi provides hints and sometimes says explicitly that his organization has branches in various areas, mainly inside Israel.[25] For example, he calls to the "brothers and groups in Jerusalem, belonging to the Fatah Al-Islam" to stick not only to a unity of minds but also to an organizational unity.[26] Elsewhere he says in an explicit answer to a surfer's question that "we have groups belonging to the Fatah Al-Islam inside beloved Palestine, and we are working on strengthening the organization in Jerusalem."[27] In another instance Al-Maqdisi clarifies that his war is not a direct war with the enemy, but a battle of nerves meant to exhaust and gradually pulverize the enemy.[28]

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[23] Al-Maqdisi denies any involvement of his organization in the launching of Katyusha rockets towards Israel from Lebanon, but welcomes any action against Israel and the Jews. See p. 18.
[24] Ibid, p. 16.
[25] Ibid, p. 14.
[26] Ibid, p. 25. In another instance Al-Maqdisi states that the organization has a secret cell in Gaza and outside Palestine due to Hamas' refusal to allow Jihadi organizations to operate in its territory. See p. 18.
[27] Ibid, p. 46.
[28] Ibid, p. 21.

The Organization's Objectives

Al-Maqdisi states that the organization was founded with the objective of fighting the Zionists and the Crusades. However, various circumstances have sobered up the organization, making it realize that Arab governments also have a significant role in oppressing the Mujahideen and helping the infidels. Therefore his men were forced to examine their actions and decided to expand the campaign and fight on two fronts at the same time.[29] That is, against the closer enemy and against the distant enemy. In another instance Al-Maqdisi states that Fatah Al-Islam views the Zionists and the Crusaders as one entity to be fought.[30] According to him, fighting these two enemies from within, and from the outside, will help realize the organization's strategic plan, that is – the implementation of the Sharia. That is why Al-Maqdisi points to the need for Da'awa amongst the Muslim population and the need to persuade it to adhere to the Quran and the Sunna.[31]

In view of that, Al-Maqdisi counts several Arab entities who, in his eyes, constitute enemies just as bad as the Crusaders and the Jews. For example, he refers to the in-house danger threatening his organization and other Mujahideen, and admits freely that he is aware of the existence of a plan on the part of the Lebanese Army, the PLO and Fatah, to enter refugee camps in Lebanon in order to clear them of various Jihadi operators.[32] In another instance he dismisses Sa'ad Al-Hariri's Lebanese "Al-Mustaqbal" Party and the Syrian Ba'ath Party, referring to them as infidel entities that are not part of the Islamic religion.[33] He also condemns the Syrian Ba'ath Party's attempts to cause division and

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[29] Ibid, pp. 54-55.
[30] Ibid, p. 26.
[31] Ibid, p. 21.
[32] Ibid, p. 39.
[33] Ibid, p. 17.

segmentation within the Sunni congregation in Lebanon. According to him, this unfit policy stemmed from a deep crisis and fear due to Syria being surrounded by Mujahideen from Iraq and Lebanon.[34]

According to him, the cooperation with infidel Arab countries such as Lebanon and Syria is unequivocally prohibited. He even goes as far as using the weapon of Takfir against any Muslim helping these countries or Al-Hariri's Lebanese party or the Syrian Ba'ath Party, whether in a military or security aspect. According to him, such Muslims are no longer a part of the Muslim nation and the letting of their blood is allowed.[35] Not only that, he supports attacking Muslim soldiers despite the explicit prohibition on the part of several religious clerics to do so, rationalizing this by saying that they are pawns in the hands of infidel Arab governments by pursuing the Mujahideen and incarcerating them.[36]

It is apparent that the shift in the organization's attitude towards the identity of the enemy by including Arab governments alongside the Western countries and the Jews, declaring them as enemies from within and from without, stems from the traumatic experience of the forceful oppression it endured by the Lebanese Army and the indifference of the Muslims to the fate of the organization's members. As an example he mentions several Sunni religious clerics who were the organization's greatest critics, such as the Mufti of Hasbaya and Marj-Ayoun, claiming that they instructed the Lebanese Army to destroy mosques "on the heads of the Fatah Al-Islam members". Furthermore, according to him, the

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[34] Ibid, p. 10.
[35] Ibid, p. 17.
[36] Ibid, p. 44. However, he states that the intentional killing of innocent Muslim citizens is prohibited. See p. 21.

UNIFIL forces were another factor in the unholy alliance created against Fatah Al-Islam.[37]

Financing

In order to fight on both of these fronts, Al-Maqdisi admits that money is a main lifeline necessary for Jihad and therefore he does not rule out raising funds by way of bank robbery. In his eyes it is better to focus on the enemy's banks and financial institutions, such as those belonging to the Crusaders, the Jews, the Freemasons and corrupt Muslims, than to appeal or rely on government aid, support from the organization members or on donations from Muslim citizens. He believes this for several reasons: firstly, receiving aid from an infidel country or a seemingly "Muslim" country does not befit Islamic doctrine. Secondly, any influx of funds from the organization's members does not guarantee the organization's ongoing activity, due to the all-out war on the economic front waged by the enemies of Jihad organizations. Furthermore, appropriating the enemy's financial sources is the best option - it is allowed by Islamic religious law, and it hurts the enemy's financial strength.[38]

Shiites

Al-Maqdisi is asked whether his organization intends to act against the Shiites, headed by Hezbollah in Lebanon. According to him, the Jihad plan has prioritized the creation of a popular support base that will constitute a sturdy support structure for the Mujahideen's activities. Therefore at least for now, anti-Shiite activities should be avoided, as they may detract from the Mujahideen's standing in the eyes of the public and diminish the support they receive. However they will

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[37] Ibid, p. 22.
[38] Ibid, pp. 22-23.

not hesitate to attack the Shiites if the latter try to harm them, and it would then be an exercise of self-defense. He also says explicitly that under the current circumstances the organization is still weak, and cannot afford such activities.[39] Al-Maqdisi does not hesitate to blame Hezbollah for being passive and resting on its laurels as far as retaliatory attacks against Israel are concerned. He mentions the "Gaza events" (i.e. Operation Cast Lead, January 2009) as an example of Hezbollah's passiveness "The best proof are the recent events in Gaza, in the course of which Hezbollah has not fired a single shot against the Jews."[40]

Hamas

Al-Maqdisi's attitude towards Hamas is ambivalent. On the one hand, his heart is with the Hamas movement due to its battle against the Jews. On the other hand, he admits to controversy between the Salafi-Islamic doctrine and that of the Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. For example, he bemoans the fact that Hamas is a national movement which agrees to house infidel "Muslims" who have sinned in the name of nationality and based on nationality.

According to him, Hamas glorifies Arafat's persona and displays him as a national Palestinian symbol, while Arafat and his friends at the Fatah movement are nothing but infidels. Al-Maqdisi also criticizes Hamas' approach towards the implementation of the idea of Jihad, saying it is managed in a faulty manner and is inappropriate with regards to the Sharia. For example, he criticizes its compromising attitude towards infidel Arab governments such as Syria, and its contact with senior members of the Syrian Ba'ath Party and senior members of the Iranian government. However, he continues to view Hamas as an integral

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[39] Ibid, p. 30.
[40] Ibid, p. 10.

part of the "Jihad movements, operating for the introduction of Allah's Sharia, and for the shaming of the rulers who have abandoned Islam."

At the same time he pleads with the Hamas leadership to adopt the path of Osama bin Laden, who displays a different attitude towards the Arab governments, such as his call for Jihad against Sheikh Sharif's rule in Somalia.[41]

Summary

The formula of presenting questions posed by surfers and the Salafi Sheikhs' answers on the Jihadi forums appears to be a successful platform for all three players, that is – the surfers, the guest Salafi Sheikh, and the Jihadi forums. The surfers receive advice or clarifications on various subjects from distinguished Sheikhs and get a "taste" of the Sheikh's aura, the Salafi Sheikhs receive greater exposure for the presentation of their beliefs and interpretations, and the Jihadi forums strengthen the ties with the surfers, thus contributing to the strengthening of the Jihad and Mujahideen propaganda machine.

In this case we are given a rare opportunity to get to know Al-Maqdisi's world view and that of his organization, Fatah Al-Islam. We also learn that the aforementioned organization did not disappear from the scene following the grave defeat it sustained at the hands of the Lebanese Army, but that it invests efforts in the rehabilitation of its organizational infrastructure and in the recruiting of new members. If Al-Maqdisi's claim is true, then his organization has a branch in Israel, in particular in the Jerusalem area. Aside from that, "the open forum" with Al-Maqdisi teaches us of the changes in the organization's view of the identity of the enemy. That is, the expansion of the Jihad arena not only

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[41] Ibid, pp. 32-35.

against the outside enemy, Israel and the West, but also towards the internal enemy – the Arab governments who are perceived as being more dangerous than the outside enemy. Therefore, Al-Maqdisi claims that both these fronts should be fought simultaneously without leaving a trail that would lead to the identity of the perpetrators, due to concerns of a retaliatory attack that would hurt the organization's vitality.