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POST-MORTEM PROFILE OF SHEIKH HISHAM ALI ABD AL-KARIM SAIDANI

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ABSTRACT

Ever since Hamas violently took over control of the Gaza in June 2007, several Salafi groups including Tawhid Al-Jihad have become more powerful and have been linked to global Jihad. The goal of such Jihadi groups is to wage an all-out war on anything modern or western and even non-Islamic Palestinians. In addition, they also attack any Muslim who does not conform to Sharia law such as Hamas. In his fight to make Gaza more Islamist, Tawhid Al-Jihad has recently (November 2012) joined forces with Jund Ansar Allah (another Al-Qaeda Salafist group), to create a Salafist council called the Majles Shoura Al-Mujahideen of Jerusalem or MSC, which can be described as an umbrella organization for Gazan Salafist-Jihadist groups with links to global Jihad.

* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

Introduction

On October 12, 2012, in another one of its long list of targeted killings, an Israeli air-force drone shot and killed two operatives who were affiliated with global Jihad networks in Gaza. One of these operatives was a man named Sheikh (Emir) Hisham Ali Abd al-Karim Saidani, alias Abu Al-Walid Al-Maqdisi, an-Egyptian born Salifist with ties to Al-Qaeda, and the leader of the Gaza-based Salafi-Jihadi group Jamaat Al-Tawhid Al-Jihad (Al-Qaeda) or 'Tawhid Al-Jihad'.² This Gaza-based Islamic group has claimed responsibility for several terrorist incidents in Israel, examples of which include detonating a roadside IED (improvised explosive device) attack against an IDF (Israel Defense Force) jeep near the Kissufim Crossing that killed one soldier (Appendix A), shooting at Israeli soldiers, and also firing rockets into Israel (a video is posted on its website)³. Tawhid Al-Jihad is also known for the kidnapping of a pro-Palestinian Italian activist named Vittorio Arrigoni and his subsequent hanging when the group's demands were not met.⁴ Ever since Hamas violently took over control of the Gaza in June 2007, several Salafi groups including Tawhid Al-Jihad have become more powerful and have been linked to global Jihad.⁵ The goal of such Jihadi groups is to wage an all-out war on anything modern or western and even non-Islamic Palestinians.⁶ In addition, they also attack any Muslim who does not conform to Sharia law such as Hamas. In his fight to make Gaza more Islamist, Tawhid Al-

² MEMRI, Special Dispatch No.3577

³ Link to YouTube account of the group. The videos have been taken down by the U.S. State Department.
<http://www.youtue.com/AhDoodieClaire>

⁴ Ely Karmon, *Assassinating Hope – Another Crime*,
<http://www.ict.org.il/NewsCommentaries/Commentaries/tabid/69/Articlsid/923/currentpage/6/Default.aspx>

⁵ IDF Spokesman, October 14th, <http://www.idf.il/1283-17299-en/Dover.aspx>

⁶ Ely Karmon, *Assassinating Hope – Another Crime*,
<http://www.ict.org.il/NewsCommentaries/Commentaries/tabid/69/Articlsid/923/currentpage/6/Default.aspx>

Jihad has recently (November 2012) joined forces with Jund Ansar Allah (another Al-Qaeda Salafist group), to create a Salafist council called the Majles Shoura Al-Mujahideen of Jerusalem or MSC (Appendix B), which can be described as an umbrella organization for Gazan Salafist-Jihadist groups with links to global Jihad.⁷

Background

Hisham was born in Cairo in 1969. He began learning Quran and inquired about hadiths at the age of 15 and memorized the Quran before joining the faculty of Arts Department of Arabic Language in Cairo.⁸ He graduated from Al-Azhar University and later joined its graduate studies program before dropping out in order to move to Gaza. While there, he wanted to join the path of Jihad by going to Iraq by leaving Gaza through tunnels, but was initially caught by Egyptian forces and imprisoned only to later be released and eventually successfully reaching Iraq.⁹ After spending time in Iraq, he returned to Gaza and lived in his family home in the Bureij refugee camp. During this time he did not join any political groups as he saw them as being too modern and having lost faith with Islam. In order to further his ideals, the Sheikh formed a new group that would raise his ideas of fundamentalist Salafi ideology, as he created the Jamaat Al-Tawhid Al-Jihad or Tawhid Al-Jihad with the help of other Salafists that he met.¹⁰ On February 5, 2011, Hisham issued a fatwa stating “that while Islam prohibits the killing of innocents, Jews and Christians may be targeted because they are not innocent but 'aggressive combatants'.”¹¹

⁷ <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=289326> *Al-Qaida group urges jihad after Gaza leaders slain*

⁸ Ibn Taymiya Media Center *A profile of the issue of the imprisoned sheikh Abu Al-Walid Al-Maqdisi*, http://www.bigupload.com/files/05f1aa2f.1_doc

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibn Taymiya Media Center *A profile of the issue of the imprisoned sheikh Abu Al-Walid Al-Maqdisi*, http://www.bigupload.com/files/05f1aa2f.1_doc

¹¹ MEMRI, Special Dispatch No.3577

Hisham received recognition from the head Salafist in Jordan, Sheikh Abu Mohammed Al-Maqdisi (one of Al-Qaeda's main ideologues), and received his commendation that he was following the path of the Salafi. Apparently, it was influence from Al-Maqdisi that spurred Hisham to adopt his other name, Abu Al-Walid Al-Maqdisi.¹² Hisham started to have conflict with the Hamas, as he called for further implementation of Sharia law. Hamas eventually captured him as well as some other members of his terrorist group three days before Operation Cast Lead. He was subsequently released but was imprisoned once again in 2011. This led to the kidnapping of Vittorio Arrigoni by the Tawhid Al-Jihad (they also protested passively), in protest of the Hisham's "unfair" imprisonment by Hamas.¹³ He was later released in September 2011 but was detained again by the Hamas in order to appease Egyptian demands. In October 2012 he was released for the last time only a few days before he was killed by an Israeli drone missile. The leader of Jund Ansar Allah Salafi group was also on the same motorcycle and was killed as well. A few days before his assassination, another member of his brotherhood named Abdullah Muhammad Mohsen Makkawi was killed, in a similar fashion.¹⁴

Organization and Ideology

Jamaat Al-Tawhid Al-Jihad is described as "the most extreme and violent of all the organizations."¹⁵ The name is taken from an Al-Qaeda network in Iraq that was founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.¹⁶ It is a Sunni Jihadist group that believes in returning Islam to its roots and becoming more fundamental in nature. Its members despise modernism and want the Islamic world to turn its back on the West. Najeh Ibrahim, an official in the Muslim Brotherhood, has

¹² <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il> *Implications of the death of Hisham Saidani*

¹³ Ibn Taymiya Media Center *A profile of the issue of the imprisoned sheikh Abu Al-Walid Al-Maqdisi*, http://www.bigupload.com/files/05f1aa2f.1_doc

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Imasryalyoum.com according to <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20406>

¹⁶ http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/profiles/al-qaeda_in_iraq.htm *Al-Qaeda in Iraq*

described groups such as Tahwid and Jihad as Takfir. Takfir can be defined as Muslims declaring other Muslims unbelievers or “infidels”¹⁷. Najeh Ibrahim added Tawhid Al-Jihads’ ideology influenced groups which were responsible for the bombings in Taba, Dahab, and Sharm El Sheikh in 2004, 2005, and 2006, that killed a large number of Muslims.”¹⁸ Tawhid Al-Jihad has been linked with training the two terrorists who were responsible for the April 2006 attack on the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Dahab.¹⁹ The specific structure and hierarchy of the group is unknown, or even how many members it has. Other Al-Qaeda inspired groups in Gaza include Jund Ansar Allah and the Army of Islam, the latter responsible for many attacks such as the attack at the Kerem Shalom crossing that killed 16 Egyptian soldiers.²⁰

It appears that Hisham was trying to merge his group with the other Al-Qaeda Jihadist groups in Gaza: “The men had recently merged their groups to form the umbrella Majles Shoura Al-Mujahideen...the de facto heads of the Gazan Jihadi network.”²¹ After his death, it can be seen that the Majles Shoura Al-Mujahideen (or MSC) has been launching missiles at Israel during Operation Pillar Defense and even collaborating with other Al-Qaeda groups in Gaza such as the Army of Islam.²² He seems to have had a strong connection with Jund Ansar Allah, and it may be surmised that perhaps he had a strong connection with the Army of Islam. His group, as was shown in the previous paragraph, has connections with the Al-Qaeda branch in the Sinai. In addition, Tawhid Al-Jihad has shown kinship to Al-Qaeda's leaders around the world. For example, in June 2010 when one of the Al-Qaeda's top leaders in Pakistan was killed by an

¹⁷ http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/dhs_crcl_terminology_08-1-08_accessible.pdf

¹⁸ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/01/08/egypt-jihadists-groups-flourish-in-sinai-security-vacuum.html> *Jihadist Groups Flourish In Sinai Security Vacuum*

¹⁹ <http://jcpa.org/article/the-growing-al-qaeda-presence-in-the-amas-controlled-gaza-strip/> *The Growing al-Qaeda Presence in the Hamas-Controlled Gaza Strip*

²⁰ <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20385> *Profile of The Army of Islam*

²¹ <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/10/14/uk-palestinians-israel-violence-idUKBRE89C0IY20121014> *Israeli air strikes kill three Palestinian militants in Gaza*

²² http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2012/11/salafi-jihadist_groups_in_gaza.php *Gaza-based Salafi jihadists conduct joint rocket attacks, Sinai jihadists suppressed*

American drone strike, Tawhid Al-Jihad believed that he was one of “a generation” of martyred Al-Qaeda leaders such as Abu Musab al Zarqawi and Abu Laith al Libi. In addition, Al-Qaeda in Gaza has said that it “will turn the life of their enemy into unbearable hell and send them after that to eternal perdition where the Lord of the Worlds is the judge.”²³ It has shown solidarity with global Al-Qaeda, and its motives can be seen to parallel Al-Qaeda ideals and goals.

Tawhid Al-Jihad as well as the MSC have been fighting with Hamas over control of Gaza. They have accused Egypt of helping Hamas attack MSC operatives in Gaza.²⁴ In describing the goal of Al-Qaeda it has been said “Al-Qaeda generally thrives wherever central authority of governments is collapsing and therefore its current success in war-torn Gaza should not come as a surprise.”²⁵ Furthermore it has been concluded “All the evidence indicates that rather than challenge Al-Qaeda’s bid to expand its presence in Gaza, Hamas prefers to collaborate with these new militant groups.”²⁶ This was the truth back in 2006, but since then times have changed as the rise of Al-Qaeda in Gaza has grown. Hamas has had a hard time trying to balance its priorities and who it wants to appease. In one sense, it is trying to gain support from Egypt in its struggle against Israel. In doing so, Hamas must listen to Egyptian requests and try to help Egypt as much as possible. This was evident in the aftermath of the attack of August 5, 2012 which killed 16 Egyptians that was sponsored in part by the Army of Islam in Gaza. When the facts of the attack became clear, Egypt requested from Hamas to give over three militants that were involved in the attack.²⁷ In general it appears as if Hamas is trying to crack down on the Al-Qaeda in its territory by having an active propaganda campaign, closing

²³ http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/mujahideen_shura_cou.php#ixzz2DKq2yJAI *Mujahideen Shura Council is consolidation of Salafi-Jihadist groups in Gaza: sources*

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ <http://jcpa.org/article/the-growing-al-qaeda-presence-in-the-hamas-controlled-gaza-strip/> *The Growing al-Qaeda Presence in the Hamas-Controlled Gaza Strip*

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20385> *Profile of the Army of Islam.*

smuggling tunnels between the Sinai and Gaza, detaining dozens of Salafist Jihadi operatives and conducting “intensive investigations” into the connections between those jihad groups and global Jihadi operatives in the Sinai.²⁸

Reasons for Being Targeted by Israel

According to a statement made by the Spokesman of the IDF which was made on October 13th, “Since his release and in recent days, Saidani had been planning a complex attack to be carried out along the Sinai border, a collaboration between Gaza-based militants and Salafi operatives in Sinai.”²⁹ Israel decided to take him out as a result of his recent attacks against Israeli civilians and his planning to make further attacks against Israel in the future. It can be assumed that he was also targeted for his connections with the Jihadist Al-Qaeda world and its goal of destroying Israel. Under his leadership, Israel was also attacked by several rounds of Qassam rockets directed at Israel (Appendix A), and the hope might be that with him out of the picture then some of the rockets would diminish. In another point of view, it can be said that his being killed actually helps the Hamas regime. Israel, either deliberately or non-deliberately, was responsible for quieting the dissension within the Gaza. It could be that he was targeted because he was so fundamentalist and such a strict Jihadist, and Israel believed that he was more extreme than the Hamas. In any case, his timely demise will not be missed by either Israel or the Hamas.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ <http://www.idf.il/1153-17287-EN/Dover.aspx> (IDF Announcement) *Further Details in Latest Terror Operative Targeting*

³⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19952325> *Israel seeks to contain Gaza's salafi-jihadist threat*

Responses by Different Groups to the Assassination

In response to the rise of global Jihad and the Israeli government's policy in dealing with terrorists, Benjamin Netanyahu stated his satisfaction with the drone attack: "First, I would like to commend the IDF's precise action in the Gaza Strip last night. Global Jihad has stepped up its efforts to attack us and we will continue to operate against it, aggressively and in strength, both in response and in preventive counter-terrorism."³¹ The IDF has for many years targeted different leaders in the Palestinian political structure that it has seen as jeopardizing the stability of the area. This can be seen even with the assassination of Ahmed Jabri, the commander of military wing of the Hamas, as he has targeted Israel for many years and was also responsible for the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit.

The response by Al-Qaida in the Arabian (AQAP) was stated on the different Jihadist forums, the following is a translation by the *Jerusalem Post*: "We ask God to heal our wounded Mujahadin brethren in Palestine for their loss, and to reward them with great patience and resolve on the path of Jihad and sacrifice for Palestine's liberation."³² It further said "the blood of Muslim heroes is not cheap, nor is it shed in vain. The Jews will pay," and it threatened Israel with a large-scale revenge.

Majles Shoura Al-Mujahideen also had a response to the killing of their leader. In a video detailing its rocket attacks on Israel, the MSC has stated "We will pound your settlements and will uproot you, God permitting, from our land, and we will fight you as long as we hold

³¹ <http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Spokesman/Pages/spokestart141012.aspx> PM Netanyahu's Remarks at the Start of the Weekly Cabinet Meeting.

³² <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=289326>. Al-Qaida group urges jihad after Gaza leaders slain

weapons in our hands.”³³ There was also a big crowd that came out for his funeral: “In a sign of Salafi assertiveness in Gaza, about 500 mourners attended Saedni's and Sabah's funerals on Sunday. Some wore the smocks typical of the Al-Qaeda bastions in Pakistan and Afghanistan but relatively uncommon among Palestinians.”³⁴ Salafi leader Abu Huthayfa said during the funeral that Abu al-Walid al-Maqdisi's martyrdom “will not end Jihad against the Jews, but rather open the door to more painful attacks.” Abu Huthayfa also stated that as a result of Hisham's assassination “we will fight more viciously.”³⁵

³³ http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2012/11/salafi-jihadist_groups_in_Gaza.php *Gaza-based Salafi jihadists conduct joint rocket attacks, Sinai jihadists suppressed*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ <http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=528905> *Israeli strike kills 2 in central Gaza, 2 wounded*

Appendices

Appendix A

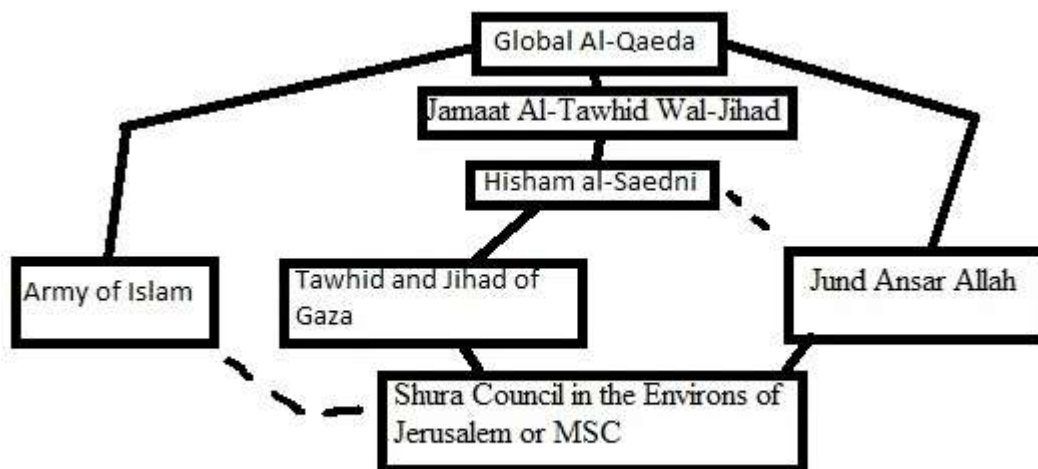
List of confirmed attacks by Tawhid Al-Jihad			
Date	Location of Attack	Mode of Attack	Result of Attack
January 17, 2009	Near Kissufim Crossing in Gaza	Improvised Explosive Devise	1 IDF soldier dead 1 Officer critically injured Several slightly injured
April 10, 2011	Nahal Oz military base Al-Ein settlement Netivot Kibutz Ra'eim ³⁶	3 rockets 1 rocket 2 rockets 1 rockets	None
April 13, 2011	Nirim	2 rockets	None
April 15, 2011	Gaza	Kidnapping of Vittorio Arrigoni	Executed
October 2012	Netivot	Fired rockets	None

³⁶ <http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=377217> New Palestinian military groups surface in Gaza

November 19, 2012	Not disclosed	14 grad rockets with Army of Islam, under MSC	None known of.
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Appendix B

Approximate map of main recorded Al-Qaeda groups in Gaza*



Strong line shows a direct connection while a dotted line shows an affiliation

*As research indicated, in actuality this map could be different

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