

The Jihadi Forums: An Open Forum with Abu Muhammad 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 messages sent by Al-Qaeda's leadership and other Jihadi organizations.¹ The renowned Jihadi Sheikh, Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi,² recently discussed their great importance:³

"The Jihadi forums fulfill an important role in defending Jihad and the Mujahideen, in spreading their messages and documentary publications. They have become a true partner of the Mujahideen and an important and honest distributor of Jihadi propaganda. They publish everything the media avoids publishing."

This role does not go unnoticed by the forum managers, who work to strengthen the ties between the surfers and the forums, while at the same time expanding the boundaries of the forum's "virtual community". One of the main means for achieving that end is found in the allocation of an open forum to 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 of the forum. After closing the open forum,

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_Via_the_Internet.pdf.

² For a complete biography about him see: Joas Wagemakers, "A Purist Jihadi-Salafi: The Ideology of Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi", *BJMES*, August 2009, 36 (2), pp. 281-297.

³ "Answers to the open forum with Sheikh Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi", September 2009, page 2. Al-Maqdisi makes it a point to mention that the institutional media is unreliable and does not have the public's faith. *Ibid*, page 32.

the hosting forum publishes an electronic booklet containing most of the surfers' questions and the Sheikh's answers.⁴

Background

This document will focus on such an "open forum" with Sheikh Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, who was a guest of the "Al-Shumukh" Jihadi forum in the second half of 2009.



Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, who lives today in Jordan, is considered to be the father of the Salafi-Jihadi movement in Jordan. He was born in 1959 in the village of Barqa in the West Bank near Nablus. In 1966 he moved with his family to Kuwait, where he completed his elementary education. Upon completion of his studies and in accordance with his father's request, he went on to study sciences at the Mosul University in northern Iraq. In Iraq, he became acquainted with various groups and movements, such as the reform stream of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis and others.

However, he was mainly influenced by the Juhaiman Al-'Uteibi group, which became known following its take-over of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in

⁴ See for example:

http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/0/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWVG_Open_Forum_Abu_Abdullah_Al-Maqdisi.pdf

November 1979. In the 1980s and 1990s, he traveled between Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Jordan. At the beginning of the 1990s, Al-Maqdisi established in Jordan, together with Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, a Salafic group called Jama'at Al-Tawhid, known as "Bay'at Al-Imam". However, they and the rest of the group were arrested by the authorities, as they were considered a security risk.

At the end of the 1990s, he was released from prison together with Al-Zarqawi. After his release, he was imprisoned several more times for short periods, again due to the Jordanian authorities' concern for the state's security. Today, Al-Maqdisi is under house arrest and focuses mainly on Da'awa and is careful not to speak out against the authorities due to his experience in prison.⁵

An open forum with Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi

On July 28th and up to August 5th 2009, the Jihadi "Al-Shumukh" forum allocated an open forum to its members, to put questions to the famous and important Salafi-Jihadi Jordanian Sheikh, Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi.⁶ It should be noted that the questions sent to Al-Maqdisi could be read only by him. It is probable that by this he wished to avoid embarrassment that could stem from the need to address sensitive issues, in view of his sensitive relationship with the Jordanian authorities.⁷

At the beginning of September 2009, the forum published an electronic booklet containing the Sheikh's answers to most of the surfers' questions. Al-Maqdisi

⁵ See also: http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/0/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWVG_Al-Qaeda_Salafia.pdf, page 6

⁶ <http://shamikh.net/vb/showthread.php?t=44771>

⁷ In fact, one can pose questions to Al-Maqdisi privately via his website: <http://www.tawhed.ws>.

himself clarified that he chose not to answer all of the questions. Following are the main issues Al-Maqdisi chose to address:



Jihad

Al-Maqdisi's attitude towards Jihad and the Mujahideen is very favorable and is apparent almost throughout the entire booklet.

In his view, the September 11 attacks succeeded in creating an increased interest by the West in the Islamic religion and encouraged it to study the Islamic religion more closely. Therefore, according to him, these events produced a

positive outcome. It should be noted that these terrorist attacks are not condemned by him.⁸

In another instance, he states that in the past he expressed his admiration of Osama bin Laden and that he still holds this opinion. He even calls him the "Mujahideen's Imam".⁹ He treats Sayyid Qutb's ideology with the same reverence, and encourages reading his literature and calls him one of the giants of Islamic theory.¹⁰

In fact, Al-Maqdisi makes a point of emphasizing more than once in his replies, that he strengthens the hands of the Mujahideen wherever they may be. Thus, for example, he praises the activity of the Mujahideen who are members of the Somali "Al-Shabab" movement,¹¹ and the Mujahideen active in Iraq and even defends their decision to declare the establishment of "the Islamic State of Iraq" (ISI).¹² In another instance he declares: "As I said, I serve the Mujahideen wherever they may be [...]"¹³ "the Islamic Jihad carried out today around the world will soon herald a victory."¹⁴ He also answers a surfer's question that it is his duty to give a certain sum of charity for the Mujahideen.¹⁵

However, it is apparent that Al-Maqdisi tends to side more with the defensive Jihad than with the offensive one. In one of his answers, he recommends that the fighting youth, focus on offensive Jihad, will move towards defensive Jihad and

⁸ "Answers to the open forum with Sheikh Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi", September 2009, page 25.

⁹ Ibid, page 41.

¹⁰ In this regard he condemns all those involved in the smear campaign against Qutb's writings such as the Ulama "who are recruited and serve as allies of tyrannical governments" as well as Salafis. However, he also shows some criticism towards Qutb's ideology, containing – according to him – several mistakes. Ibid, page 19.

¹¹ Ibid, page 5.

¹² Ibid, page 33.

¹³ Ibid, page 5.

¹⁴ Ibid, page 10.

¹⁵ Ibid, page 25.

join Jihad groups who perpetrate attacks in territories under attack.¹⁶ In general, he considers an intelligent combination of Da'awa and Jihad as the right course of conduct.¹⁷

From his answers, it is apparent that he considers propaganda activities for the Mujahideen to be very important. In his eyes, all Muslims are duty bound to do so. That is, to give the Mujahideen's activities a positive image according to the Sharia and compatible with it, while deflecting the claims of those denouncing it. According to him, today there is an intensive propaganda campaign carried out by all the Muslim regimes, such as Algeria, against the Mujahideen and the Jihad ideology. Under their influence and the influence of the American RAND Institute and of conventions on the subject of the fight against terrorism, the Arab regimes succeed in recruiting religious clerics for this campaign. Therefore, all Muslims must expose this mask of lies and corrupt propaganda carried out by these regimes and Ulama against the Mujahideen and Jihad.¹⁸

In another instance he advises one of the surfers to prefer Da'awa for the Mujahideen over leaving for Jihad due to the poor health of the surfer's mother. According to him, there is a greater duty and responsibility to stay near the sick mother's bed and care for her needs. The involvement in Da'awa is also considered to be an important means of aiding Jihad.¹⁹

On another question connected to Da'awa but from a different aspect, Al-Maqdisi is asked to render his opinion on Muslim soldiers serving in western enemy

¹⁶ Ibid, page 17. In this regard, Al-Maqdisi states that when dealing in defensive Jihad, there is no need for authorization from any entity. Ibid, page 23.

¹⁷ Ibid, page 22.

¹⁸ Ibid, page 5.

¹⁹ Ibid, page 27.

armies such as the U.S. Army. Al-Maqqdisi does not rush to condemn this phenomenon and states that not all Muslim soldiers who are part of the fighting forces, whether in the front line or on the home front, should be categorized as a group to be fought against. However, he advises, at least as far as the surfer is concerned, trying to influence them, warn them, advise them and save them by bringing them closer to the monotheistic faith and detaching them from polytheism. In other words, Al-Maqqdisi sees fit to bring back Muslim soldiers, in this case – soldiers serving in the U.S. Army, to the pure Islamic faith by way of persuasion and Da'awa. From that point, he believes one should try and make them realize that their decision to join these armies is wrong.²⁰ In another instance, however, he unequivocally condemns Muslims joining the security forces of a country that is not an Islamic country.

According to Al-Maqqdisi, receiving aid from infidels is also considered a donation for the purpose of Jihad. He believes that such aid on the part of human rights organizations, that can help the Mujahideen and Muslim prisoners, is not considered an offence in Islam. Furthermore, one should join hands with such "pro-Islamic" infidels, while at the same time one should work at bringing them closer to the Islamic religion. Al-Maqqdisi unequivocally states, in fact, that it is strictly forbidden to hurt infidels wishing to help Muslims, as by hurting them the efforts of Jihad are undermined and the true sense of the religion is distorted.²¹

The use of Takfir

A central issue that came up in the surfers' questions is the use of the Takfir weapon against Muslims. That is, when and if one can implement the Law of Infidels on Muslims, ostensibly presenting themselves as Muslims while

²⁰ Ibid, page 13.

²¹ Ibid, page 20.

cooperating with tyrannical Arab regimes, including Christian governments or the Israeli government.

Al-Maqdisi is cautious in this matter and wishes to emphasize that he is being careful in ruling on this matter in light of its complexity, requiring deeper examination and analysis, with each case being examined on its own merit. His caution is mainly due to his fear that such a ruling will be exploited by Muslim groups, tending to exaggerate in the use of this principle.²² He permits trying to persuade a Muslim, who has been declared an infidel, to return to the righteous path, only if conditions allow it. In his eyes, Muslims aiding tyrannical infidel governments are considered infidel, but one must not be quick to declare them as such, as many of them are unaware of the true nature of these tyrants, striving for the demonization of the Mujahideen. That is why it is better to make the truth clear to the masses and the ignorant and reveal the real faces of these tyrants.²³

Al-Maqdisi states that in helping the infidels, damage is undoubtedly caused to the foundations of Islam. However, one must make a distinction between implementing Takfir on the Muslim executing heresy (Al-Fa'il) and between the act of heresy itself (Al-Fi'l). A Muslim informing on the Mujahideen and the Salafi-Jihadists, claiming they are Khawaridj ("those who went out"), to defend the ruler, is considered to be helping the infidels. Thus he is committing severe heresy, contradictory to the principles of Islam. However, it is important to note that Al-Maqdisi emphasizes again that implementing the Law of Infidels on a

²² Ibid, page 8.

²³ Ibid, page 16.

Muslim, first and foremost requires a rigorous examination of the context and the conditions for its implementation.²⁴

In another instance, Al-Maqdisi believes that implementing the Law of Infidels by several religious clerics on the well-known Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qardawi (born in 1926),²⁵ is unwise.²⁶ He believes that "Al-Qardawi is considered to be a misleading Imam, from whom one should beware as well as from his misleading fatwas", but according to him he refrains from declaring him an infidel, especially after Al-Qardawi recanted some of his rulings, such as his ruling that Muslim soldiers, serving in the American Army, can fight against Muslims.²⁷ He refers to the fatwa, published by al-Qardawi in 2001, following the U.S. intention to invade Afghanistan in order to strike at Al-Qaeda's terrorist camps, as retaliation for the September 11 attacks.²⁸

In another instance, Al-Maqdisi rules unequivocally, that whoever uses the weapon of Takfir without providing proof, stemming from capriciousness or other interests, is considered as one of the Khawaridj.²⁹

²⁴ Ibid, page 20.

²⁵ Al-Qardawi, residing today in Qatar after emigrating from his homeland of Egypt, is considered to be one of the most influential Islamic ideologists in the Islamic world. In his past he was part of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and today heads the Wasatiyya Islamic movement. Apart from that, he heads important global Islamic entities such as "The Global Union of Muslim Religious Clerics" or "The European Council for Religious Opinion for Research". For an updated extensive review of his writings, see: Samuel Helfont, *Yusuf Al-Qaradawi; Islam and Modernity*, Tel Aviv: The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2009.

²⁶ However, he believes that the different approaches of religious clerics regarding the implementation of the Law of Infidels should be respected. See "Answers to the open forum with Sheikh Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi", page 23.

²⁷ Ibid, page 8.

²⁸ <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=61545&issueno=8356>

²⁹ Ibid, pages 28, 39.

The Hamas movement

The Hamas movement and its leadership were a central issue on which Al-Maqdisi was required to give his opinion. The main question raised by most of the forum surfers was whether the Hamas leadership and its members should be perceived as Muslims who have left their religion ("Murtadun").

It should be noted that this issue has in the past, and still is today, been at the core of intense discussions amongst the current Salafi-Jihadi movement in view of Hamas' heavy handed attitude towards the Salafi in the Gaza Strip, and especially following the elimination of activists from the Palestinian "Jund Ansar Allah" organization, identified with Al-Qaeda and Global Jihad, on August 14th 2009.

According to Al-Maqdisi, the participation of Hamas members in the fight against the Jews does not provide them with automatic immunity against being considered infidels, as there are secular and left-wing organizations that also wage battle against the Jews. According to him, the Hamas government harms the foundations of the Islamic religion and continues to deviate from the Sharia. Furthermore, it prefers to adhere to man-made laws and is not loath to use harsh means of oppression in order to oppress any Muslim who does not conform to its outlook.³⁰ It was wise enough to gain, in its early days, sympathy and wide popular support thanks to its fight against the Jews. However, with its rise to government in Gaza in 2006, it has abolished Sharia rule and followed the wayward countries and parties.³¹

³⁰ Ibid, page 9.

³¹ Ibid, page 32.

In another reference, Al-Maqdisi states that Hamas rule should not be recognized, and that one should avoid joining its government institutions, such as the police and the various security forces, for two main reasons:

- a. So as not to lend a hand to the establishment of its rule
- b. So as not to be a part of the enforcement of laws that are not Sharia.

According to him, it is better to avoid a frontal confrontation with the Hamas rule and focus on preparing the land and recruiting more followers to the idea of Tawhid and the eradication of all that is opposed to the Sharia.³²

Al-Maqdisi chooses to render his opinion on questions regarding the Izz Al-Din Al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas's military branch. In his eyes, they should not be viewed as one unified group, as there are Muslims amongst them who wish to implement the Sharia. In other words, according to him, they should not be viewed as infidels as long as they refrain from implementing man-made laws.³³ However, he states that it is forbidden to join the Izz Al-Din Al-Qassam Brigades or fight alongside anyone calling for the return of the Jahiliyyah, the pre-Islamic age of ignorance.³⁴ He even calls upon the Izz Al-Din Al-Qassam Brigades members and asks them to examine Hamas' path and the conduct of its government, to shun anything that contradicts the Sharia and not to take part in the torture and killing of Muslims.³⁵ Instead, he advises them to join and help Salafi-Jihadi groups in Palestine, who wish to hoist the flag of Tawhid and to fight for this ideal.³⁶

³² Ibid, page 9.

³³ Ibid, page 33.

³⁴ Ibid, page 40.

³⁵ Ibid, page 9.

³⁶ Ibid, page 40.

It is clear, and there is no doubt, that Al-Maqdisi prefers the Palestinian population to join the ranks of the Salafi-Jihadi movements, and does not approve of joining the Hamas movement. In one of the questions, the surfer states that the Hamas has a set and clear agenda while the Salafi-Jihadi movements do not. In view of this, the surfer asks whether it is better to join Hamas ranks.

Al-Maqdisi criticizes the surfer's preference, disagrees with him and claims that the Salafi-Jihadi movements do have a clear and concise agenda. According to him, his close acquaintance with some of their activists enables him to know with certainty, that their members have good qualities and true faith. He even points to the large number of supporters they have in the Gaza Strip. He constantly takes pain to emphasize that one must avoid any contact with Hamas, as it has many illnesses and damaged faith, which affects fighting under its patronage.³⁷ He also criticizes the conduct of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, except for the groups that have withdrawn from it, preferring to fight the governments through parliamentary legislation and constitutional battles, that is by integrating into the country's institutions. He views this way as wrong.³⁸

In another question Al-Maqdisi is asked to address the reason for the difference between the various approaches of the Salafi-Jihadi religious clerics towards Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed's³⁹ government in Somalia⁴⁰ and towards the Hamas government. According to him, the statement that the Somali government is an

³⁷ Ibid, page 27.

³⁸ Ibid, page 32.

³⁹ Somalia's 7th president (born in 1964).

<http://www.aljazeera.net/news/archive/archive?ArchiveId=330146>

⁴⁰ In another instance Al-Maqdisi condemns the pro-American policy of the Somali President, Sheikh Sharif, and accuses him of being a tool in American hands in their fight against the Mujahideen. "Answers to the open forum with Sheikh Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi", page 33.

infidel one is clearer than in Hamas's case. This is due to the public declaration made by the Somali government of its support of the Americans and the fight against the Mujahideen. Therefore, it is easier for the religious clerics to rule in the matter of the Somali government when they do not hasten to declare the Hamas as an infidel entity.⁴¹

Iraq

In view of the expected U.S. President's declaration that the U.S. will withdraw its troops from Iraq in July 2011 and hand over the reigns of government to the new Iraqi government, one can clearly detect the efforts of several large Jihadi organizations in Iraq (in academic literature and in general, they are often referred to as "The Resurgence Factions"), who are not identified with Al-Qaeda, to try and integrate into the country's leadership the day after the American retreat. Therefore, a certain change can be detected in their outlook as to how to achieve this goal with a focus on the diplomatic aspect, that is – via negotiations. Here too, Al-Maqdisi is asked to give his opinion.

According to Al-Maqdisi, negotiating with the enemy is allowed, only when it serves the interests of the Muslims and their countries. However, he does not feel comfortable conducting such negotiations, as far as the Iraqi government is concerned, as according to him such negotiations will not result in any benefit or gain. He therefore criticizes any such attempt. He believes that in such negotiations, the enemy strives to achieve several goals: to check the Mujahideen's pulse, to see whether they have weapons and whether they show any desire to disarm; an attempt to gain time in order to change military and

⁴¹ Ibid, pages 21-22.

tactical plans; to propagate laziness amongst the Jihadi body and war between brothers (Fitna), and to weaken the trust between them by bringing some of them in to the political game.⁴² Al-Maqdisi advises these armed groups in Iraq to avoid any negotiation with the Crusaders and to adhere to the Sharia. He even calls on them to aid the Islamic State of Iraq in the field of propaganda, as well as through the internet.⁴³

Propaganda activities for the Mujahideen

As stated above, Al-Maqdisi stresses the need for propaganda activity for the Mujahideen and for Jihad. In this regard, he refers to several religious issues connected to the posting of video clips on the Jihadi forums. The first one is the unintentional depiction of Jihad fighters in a negative light. The second one deals with the law regarding women and music in the video clips.

According to Al-Maqdisi, one must be careful to post only visual content that is not offensive to the Mujahideen. Therefore, he suggests cooperating in the matter, in order to share professional knowledge and overcome cases when there are materials contradicting the Sharia. According to him, the forums and websites are also responsible for identifying cases where there is a probability of contradiction to the Sharia. For example, he refers to video clips which focus on the enemy's crimes such as cases of rape.

According to him, in these videos one must cover or blur a woman's private parts, as well as her face. He also demands omitting from the videos provocative segments as well as music. And in his words:

⁴² Ibid, page 19.

⁴³ Ibid, page 10.

"As long as the matters [contradicting the Sharia] can be corrected in the documentary films, and as long as they are under our control, they must not be abandoned or ignored, in order to protest the corruption raging in the streets, on television and the internet – which is not under our control and which we cannot correct."

Al-Maqdisi further points to the added value in transcribing recordings and audio segments, as the written word has more value as it immortalizes the words.⁴⁴

Other issues

Al-Maqdisi is asked to render his opinion on other matters such as religious law. For example, he refers to the law regarding sacrifices made by Muslims who have abandoned Islam (Murtadun),⁴⁵ shaving the beard,⁴⁶ abandoning the commandment of donations as atonement,⁴⁷ the prohibition on contact between the two sexes in educational institutions,⁴⁸ the fate of the Shiite in the eyes of the Sharia⁴⁹ and more.

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 of the 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

⁴⁴ Ibid, pages 2-4.

⁴⁵ According to Al-Maqdisi the Murtadun are still members of the Islamic religions, but there is a consensus (Ijma') that eating from a sacrifice they made is forbidden. Furthermore, he intends to publish soon an essay on this subject.

⁴⁶ Ibid, page 22.

⁴⁷ Ibid, page 20.

⁴⁸ Ibid, page 20.

⁴⁹ For example, Al-Maqdisi states that the Shiites are considered an infidel people in Islam. Ibid, pages 34, 43, but states that one must not kill a Shiite just because he is part of the Shiite school of thought. Ibid, page 41.

Sheikhs and get a "taste" of the Sheikh's aura, the Salafi Sheikhs receive greater exposure for the presentation of their beliefs and interpretation, and the Jihadi forums strengthen the ties with the surfers, thus contributing to the strengthening of the Jihad and Mujahideen propaganda machine. Al-Maqdisi has already acknowledged the contribution of the Jihadi forums to the Jihadi propaganda and has admitted to it freely.