

Living Long Enough to See Yourself Become the Villain: The Case of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi

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Articles & Testimony

Recent developments in Syria indicate that the jihadi movement is splitting once again, as a prominent ideologue begins to form a third pole at odds with both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

It has become a trope within the jihadi studies field to describe Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (born 'Isam Bin Muhammad Bin Tahir al-Barqawi) as being the most important jihadi ideologue alive. Part of this derives from a study written by Will McCants in 2006 that [notes \(https://ctc.usma.edu/militant-ideology-atlas/\)](https://ctc.usma.edu/militant-ideology-atlas/) he is the most cited living jihadi ideologue within jihadi primary source literature. At the time, in many ways, al-Qaeda (AQ) was also the unipolar leader of the jihadi world. Since then, cracks in the foundation of AQ's leading role have created alternative visions for the future of the jihadi movement. Most notable has been the case of the Islamic State (IS), but another is that of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In attempting to bolster their legitimacy, these different currents have moved away from al-Maqdisi and even derided him. The story of al-Maqdisi's [issues \(https://www.hudson.org/research/9771-a-virulent-ideology-in-mutation-zarqawi-upstages-maqdisi#:~:text=The%20Jordanians%20thought%20that%20a,foundations%E2%80%94but%20they%20were%20mistaken.\)](https://www.hudson.org/research/9771-a-virulent-ideology-in-mutation-zarqawi-upstages-maqdisi#:~:text=The%20Jordanians%20thought%20that%20a,foundations%E2%80%94but%20they%20were%20mistaken.) with the leader of IS's predecessor, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, and of IS [toying \(http://www.jihadica.com/maqdisi-in-the-middle-an-inside-account-of-the-secret-negotiations-to-free-a-jordanian-pilot/\)](http://www.jihadica.com/maqdisi-in-the-middle-an-inside-account-of-the-secret-negotiations-to-free-a-jordanian-pilot/) with him during fake negotiations over the Jordanian pilot Mu'adh al-Kasasbah, are well-trodden at this point. But more recent recriminations between al-Maqdisi and HTS are also worth exploring since they signal a change in tone. Although there have been vigorous [debates \(http://www.jihadica.com/diluting-jihad/\)](http://www.jihadica.com/diluting-jihad/) between al-Maqdisi and HTS over decisions to move away from AQ and HTS's alleged "diluting" of its ideology, this latest round of argument augurs another broken chain within the jihadi movement and further cements the fact that claiming HTS is some kind of front for AQ is incorrect in the same way that saying ISIS was still within AQ in 2013 was wrong.

BACKGROUND: HTS DISMANTLES HURRAS AL-DIN AND THE 'SO BE STEADFAST' OPERATIONS ROOM

Hurras al-Din (HD) was [established \(https://jihadology.net/2018/02/27/new-statement-from-%e1%b8%a5uras-al-din-save-the-tent-of-the-muslims/\)](https://jihadology.net/2018/02/27/new-statement-from-%e1%b8%a5uras-al-din-save-the-tent-of-the-muslims/) in February 2018 as AQ's official branch in Syria, after HTS publicly distanced itself from

its parent organization. Later, in October 2018, HD set up the Wa-Harridh al-Mu'minin (And Incite the Believers) Operations Room in conjunction with two smaller AQ-aligned groups, Jabhat Ansar al-Din and Jama'at Ansar al-Islam. HD and the operations room were allowed to operate at the behest of HTS and received food and ammunition provisions from HTS. Therefore, as I noted (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/huras-al-din-the-overlooked-al-qaeda-group-in-syria>) in September 2019, "If [HD] were to grow significantly stronger, HTS may try to suppress it and arrest its leaders in order to preserve its own power base. In that sense, HD's local growth potential is somewhat limited."

And in many ways this is what happened. On June 12, 2020, HD, alongside its two partners in the operations room, **established** (<https://jihadology.net/2020/06/12/new-release-from-so-be-steadfast-operations-room-founding-statement/>) a new operations room called "Fa-thbutu" (So Be Steadfast) that also included the groups Tansiqiyat al-Jihad and Liwa' al-Muqatilin al-Ansar. The leaders of these latter groups, Abu al-'Abd Ashida' and Abu al-Malik al-Talli respectively, both had falling-outs with HTS over the direction of the jihad, relations with Turkey, and corruption issues. Similarly, ahead of this announcement, Abu Salah al-Uzbeki, leader of Katibat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, switched its alliance from HTS to Jabhat Ansar al-Din, thereby adding another strength to this alternative jihadi bloc.

As a consequence of these shifting alliances and the bolstering of the HD-led alternative jihad, HTS arrested al-Uzbeki on June 17 and al-Talli on June 22. This led the new Fa-thbutu operations room to **warn** (<https://jihadology.net/2020/06/22/new-statement-from-so-be-steadfast-operations-room-on-the-assaults-of-hayat-ta%e1%b8%a5rir-al-sham-upon-the-so-be-steadfast-operations-room/>) HTS that it would "bear the consequences" if it did not release its leaders or subject itself to a religious court. HTS retroactively **claimed** (<https://jihadology.net/2020/06/22/new-statement-from-hayat-ta%e1%b8%a5rir-al-sham-a-circular-from-the-follow-up-and-higher-supervision-committee/>), in a circular by its Higher Follow-Up and Supervision Committee, that individuals needed authorization to either leave the group or join other groups. Anticipating a policy that would be set out in a statement days later, HTS was showing that it would not allow others to have a monopoly on violence in the territories it controlled. The arrests and perceived lack of transparency behind them led to infighting between the two factions in the towns of 'Arab Sa'id (<https://jihadology.net/2020/06/26/new-release-agreement-between-hayat-ta%e1%b8%a5rir-al-sham-and-the-so-be-steadfast-operations-room-concerning-the-village-of-arab-said/>), al-Hamamah, al-Ya'qubiyah, Jdaydah (<https://jihadology.net/2020/06/26/new-release-a-truce-agreement-between-hayat-ta%e1%b8%a5rir-al-sham-and-%e1%b8%a5uras-al-din-in-the-areas-of-al-%e1%b8%a5amamah-al-yaqubiyah-and-jdaydah/>), Armanaz, Kuku, and Shaykh Bahar (<https://jihadology.net/2020/06/26/new-release-a-third-agreement-between-hayat-ta%e1%b8%a5rir-al-sham-and-%e1%b8%a5uras-al-din-in-the-%e1%b8%a5aram-region-armanaz-kuku-and-shaykh-ba%e1%b8%a5ar/>) over the next few days until truces were brokered due to HTS overpowering HD and its allies. This led HTS on June 26 to **proclaim** (<https://jihadology.net/2020/06/26/new-statement-from-hayat-ta%e1%b8%a5rir-al-sham-on-uniting-the-military-effort/>) that the only military efforts that could be conducted would be via itself or through its own al-Fatah al-Mubin (The Clear Conquest) military operations room, thereby banning any other efforts outside this infrastructure such as HD and its own operations room. As a result, HD's military bases were shut down by HTS. Since then, neither HD nor its Fa-thbutu operations room have publicly operated, frustrating the ability of AQ to return to the forefront of the insurgency in Syria (for now, at least).

ABU MUHAMMAD AL-MAQDISI RESPONDS

Two days later al-Maqdisi **responded** (<https://jihadology.net/2020/06/28/new-release-from-shaykh-abu-mu%e1%b8%a5ammad-al-maqdisi-dilemma-of-the-supporters-of-islamic-law-between-the-client-and-used-factions/>) to these events. In an online essay he described two categories of groups that he sees as working against the interests of the true jihadis in northwest Syria: overt and covert client groups. The former are those directly backed by Turkey such as the Syrian National Army/National Liberation Front, which is operating in the Turkish-controlled zones that were taken from the Kurdish-backed Syrian Democratic Forces in parts of northwest and northeast Syria. The latter groups are an unstated reference to HTS, which al-Maqdisi sees as more dangerous since it claims the mantle of being a jihadi group but in reality is helping Turkey pursue its aims in the region. In particular, al-Maqdisi highlights how HTS protects Turkish patrols and forbids the true jihadis from targeting the Russians when Russia conducts joint patrols with Turkey. Furthermore, al-Maqdisi alludes to the above infighting and dismantlement of HD and the Fa-thbutu operations room by noting that these so-called "manipulated factions have killed the jihad of al-Sham, broken it up, and subjected it to the secular Turks."

In response, al-Maqdisi suggests two possible ways of overcoming these assaults on the legitimate jihadis. The first involves eradicating the overt client groups and reforming the covert client groups by getting defections from sincere individuals among them and then slowly replacing and overtaking their leaders. Of course, this is easier said than done. Therefore, al-Maqdisi advises that the true jihadis follow the second possible course of action, which is to disband themselves and lay in wait for the right opportunity to return. It is plausible that new and more clandestine formations like [Kata'ib Khatab al-Shishani](https://jihadology.net/category/kataib-kha%e1%b9%adab-al-shishani/) (https://jihadology.net/category/kataib-kha%e1%b9%adab-al-shishani/) (which announced itself in mid-July) and [Sariyat Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq](https://jihadology.net/category/sariyat-an%e1%b9%a3ar-abu-bakr-al-%e1%b9%a3idiq/) (https://jihadology.net/category/sariyat-an%e1%b9%a3ar-abu-bakr-al-%e1%b9%a3idiq/) (which announced itself in late August) are examples of this at play.

AL-MAQDISI DISAVOWED BY HTS

Two months later, on August 21, the feud between al-Maqdisi and HTS was reignited when al-Maqdisi [shared](https://jihadology.net/2020/08/21/is-it-time-to-say-they-are-for-unbelief-closer-than-they-are-to-faith/) (https://jihadology.net/2020/08/21/is-it-time-to-say-they-are-for-unbelief-closer-than-they-are-to-faith/) a post on his Telegram channel by an AQ supporter called Ya Sariyat al-Jabal (Oh Mast of the Mountain). The post repeats claims and affirmations about secret dealings between HTS and Turkish intelligence. The most controversial part is about how these alleged actions have essentially pushed HTS away from faith: “Everyone with knowledge of the nullifiers of Islam who is aware of these details [in relation to actions HTS has allegedly taken with Turkey] will see after considering them carefully that the leadership of [HTS] day after day gets closer to disbelief and draws farther away from faith.” Members and partisans of HTS thus interpreted al-Maqdisi’s sharing of this as his excommunicating HTS from Islam.

One of HTS’s top ideologues, Dr. Muzhir al-Ways, [responded](http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/al-Maqdisi-yukaffiru.pdf) (http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/al-Maqdisi-yukaffiru.pdf) that day to this in a Twitter post, republished by the unofficial HTS support media outlet al-Bayyinah under the title “After Being Accused of Diluting and Deviation and Stultifying the Jihad [in Syria], al-Maqdisi is Now Excommunicating HTS.” Al-Ways writes that al-Maqdisi’s false accusations against HTS today are no different from those that IS lodged against the jihadi groups in Syria some years ago. Therefore he is the “shaykh of the *khawarij*.” More damning and possibly embarrassing if true for al-Maqdisi is al-Ways’s suggestion that the account al-Maqdisi shared was in fact something he himself created to try and amplify the message while making it seem like he didn’t say it himself. The charge is not far-fetched since al-Maqdisi has been known to write content under pseudonyms before.

The next day al-Bayyinah [released](https://jihadology.net/2020/08/23/new-release-from-hayat-ta%e1%b8%a5rir-al-shams-dr-ma%e1%ba%93har-al-ways-monotheism-of-the-barqawiyah/) (https://jihadology.net/2020/08/23/new-release-from-hayat-ta%e1%b8%a5rir-al-shams-dr-ma%e1%ba%93har-al-ways-monotheism-of-the-barqawiyah/) a fuller take down of al-Maqdisi by al-Ways derisively titled “The Monotheism of Barqawism,” a reference to al-Maqdisi’s real last name and a way of stripping him of honorific legitimacy. Here al-Ways calls al-Maqdisi out for having his own version of monotheism (*tawhid*) that he uses to attack and discredit his opponents. Al-Ways also states that al-Maqdisi is not only out of touch in regard to sharia and scholarly limits related to excommunication (*takfir*), but also ignorant of what is going on the ground in northwest Syria since he is basing his views of events on television reports and social media. Interestingly, al-Ways claims that al-Maqdisi practices *taqiyyah* (dissimulating one’s true beliefs) by using euphemisms such as “dilution” of ideology instead of outright doing *takfir* on HTS.

Al-Bayyinah Media shared a number of other anti-al-Maqdisi releases in the following week via its Telegram channel. Of note is the claim that al-Maqdisi is in fact an asset of Jordanian intelligence and that his attacks on other jihadis are intended to damage and break up the movement. Al-Bayyinah Media highlights [examples](http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/al-Maqdisi-wal-kayl.pdf) (http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/al-Maqdisi-wal-kayl.pdf) of suspicious timings in the past when al-Maqdisi has been released from prison and the fact that he has [legitimized](http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/al-Maqdisi-wa-siyasatuhu.mp4) (http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/al-Maqdisi-wa-siyasatuhu.mp4) his dealings with the Jordanian government over the negotiations with IS regarding the captured Jordanian pilot in 2015.

To further discredit al-Maqdisi, al-Bayyinah Media set up a mock [website](http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/mock-minbar.pdf) (http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/mock-minbar.pdf) that appears to look like al-Maqdisi’s old Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad library of jihadi primary sources. Yet unlike the original, this is a spoof that seeks to delegitimize al-Maqdisi by highlighting articles that expose his extremism and incorrect views. On the top of the site, the creators of it state that the original Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad website was set up as a “cartoon media platform for himself” and sarcastically exclaim that “*tawhid* is a trademark registered in the name of al-Maqdisi,” who was allowed at his own whim to determine who was legitimate. The site is clearly set up to expose al-Maqdisi’s problematic views over the years. Interestingly, the site also features quotes from IS’s founder Abu

Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and one of AQ's top ideologues historically, Atiyat Allah 'Abd al-Rahman al-Libi, discussing al-Maqdisi as being important and having made a contribution to the jihadi movement but rejecting the idea that his word is infallible truth on everything.

As a consequence of all of this, Jallad al-Murji'ah (Executioner of Those Who Postpone), a pro-AQ supporter on Telegram, [complained \(https://jihadology.net/2020/08/26/new-release-from-jalad-al-murjiah-hayat-ta%e1%b8%a5rir-al-sham-and-its-malicious-media-plan-currently-approved/\)](https://jihadology.net/2020/08/26/new-release-from-jalad-al-murjiah-hayat-ta%e1%b8%a5rir-al-sham-and-its-malicious-media-plan-currently-approved/) that HTS was essentially conducting a disinformation campaign and that HTS is like the “pharaoh’s magicians, when they were bewitching the eyes of people, misleading them, making the truth void, and falsehoods correct.”

A SPLINTERED JIHADOSPHERE

Based on all of this, unlike in the past when HTS was willing to tolerate al-Maqdisi’s broadsides and even responding civilly, a redline has clearly been crossed. With accusations of creeping apostasy and extremism going back and forth, it appears unlikely that some form of reconciliation is a possibility. Back in 2013-14 we saw similar dynamics play out between jihadi groups and the ideologues of the jihadi movement, leading to an irrevocable split and the division of jihadism into a bipolar world, one torn between AQ and IS. It seems in many ways that we are now entering an era of a tri-polar jihadosphere.

Although some perceived HTS’s initial breaking of ties with AQ as a fig leaf to cover up a strong and enduring relationship, evidence from the past few years in northwest Syria—of arrests, infighting, ideological arguments, and now these latest dynamics between HTS and AQ factions since June—run counter to such a view. The dynamic between HTS and AQ is not similar to that between the Taliban and AQ, whose relationship has been tight and never foundered. HTS truly has created its own pole of jihadism outside the framework of the historical AQ network or the more contemporary IS network. What this means for the future of the broader movement is difficult to say since it does not appear (yet) that HTS has ambitions beyond Syria in comparison with the globalized networks of AQ and IS. The implications for al-Maqdisi are clearer. Considering the antipathy that both IS and now HTS have for him, al-Maqdisi’s influence continues to diminish due to the erosion in consensus amongst the broader jihadi movement over the past 15 years. And although there is no one who has likely eclipsed al-Maqdisi’s influence, it does not make sense anymore to say that al-Maqdisi is the most important jihadi ideologue in the world today when two of three jihadi poles are against him.

Aaron Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published [on the Jihadica website \(http://www.jihadica.com/living-long-enough/\)](http://www.jihadica.com/living-long-enough/). ❖

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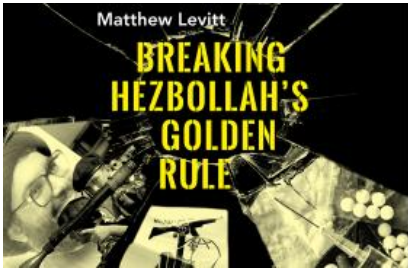
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