

Midhat Mursi al-Sayyid ‘Umar: Abu Khabab



[Midhat Mursi al-Sayyid ‘Umar, used in U.S. State Department wanted poster¹]

An Egyptian and former member of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Abu Khabab (Midhat Mursi al-Sayyid ‘Umar) served as al-Qa’ida’s bomb, chemical and biological expert as well as head of the organization’s al-Zabadi chemical weapons program. Though he is most recognized for his role in conducting chemical weapons experiments on dogs and various other animals, as depicted in video tapes acquired by CNN journalists in his former laboratory in Afghanistan, he is also linked to a number of attempted as well as successful high-profile terrorist attacks. Abu Khabab was believed to have been killed in a 2006 missile strike but U.S. officials now maintain that he did not die in the operation and is still at large.

Family

According to researchers at London’s Islamic Observation Center, Abu Khabab was born and raised in the crowded and noisy seaside al-Asafirah neighborhood of Alexandria, Egypt.² His date of birth is April 29, 1953.³ The details of his family life, the identities of his parents and siblings, their professions as well as the family’s socioeconomic status remain unknown. Later in life he became a family-man, marrying a Pakistani woman.⁴ Though the date of his marriage to this unknown woman is unclear, one may speculate that the marriage occurred sometime during the late 1980s after he left his native Egypt for Saudi Arabia and then to Afghanistan to fight in the anti-Soviet jihad. Abu Khabab was also the father of two sons, Mohamed and Hamza, though it is

¹ Rewards For Justice, http://www.rewardsforjustice.net/english/index.cfm?page=Midhat_Mursi

² Charles Hanley, “Obscure al-Qaeda Chemist Worries Experts,” *USA Today*, December 3, 2005, available online at http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-12-03-alqaeda-chemist_x.htm (Accessed 7 October 2007).

³ Rewards For Justice, http://www.rewardsforjustice.net/english/index.cfm?page=Midhat_Mursi.

⁴ “A Look at Midhat Mursi Al-Sayid Umar,” *Associated Press*, January 19, 2006, available online at <http://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/nationworld/world/wire/sns-ap-al-qaidas-chemist.0.975504.story>. (Accessed 8 September 2007).

unclear if the sons are from the Pakistani wife or a previous marriage and if he has any more children.⁵

For Abu Khabab jihad was a family affair. Recently released Harmony documents show that his family accompanied him during his activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan on at least one occasion. Though the documents do not note which family members accompanied him, they reveal Abu Khabab making plans for a roundtrip journey to Alexandria, Egypt from Pakistan with his family.⁶ It also appears that both of his sons received terrorist training and intended to carry out jihad. However, their activities as well as the al-Qa'ida-related activities of their father began to tear the family apart, when Egyptian authorities imprisoned both his sons in an effort to track down and capture their father. First, his son Mohamed was captured in Cairo airport in possession of a fake Yemeni passport in March 2001 upon arrival from Yemen. Reportedly, at the time of his capture he was en route to Chechnya where he sought to participate in the anti-Russian jihad. The second son, Hamzah, was at one time also in Egyptian custody. He was reportedly deported from Pakistan and handed over to Egyptian authorities in early 2004 though the circumstances remain unclear.⁷

Education

Abu Khabab graduated from Alexandria University as a chemical engineer in 1975. It is difficult to comment on his early education or his time in the university. However, the fact that he studied chemical engineering suggests he was a bright student who may have benefited from a prestigious early education that could be provided by a relatively wealthy family. Regardless, his educational and professional background in chemical engineering and weaponry suggest a highly intelligent and technical mind while his advancement within al-Qa'ida shows not only ambition but also organization and efficiency as a manager.

Abu Khabab's religious education and path to radical Islam are unknown. It is plausible that he witnessed and was possibly involved in the increasing Islamic radicalism and militancy characteristic of Alexandria in the early 1970s when he was attending university. According to researchers at the Islamic Observation Center in London, a person living in this environment would have been exposed not only to radicals attacking so-called non-Islamic targets, but also to religious and ideological revival and active student movements.⁸ In this light, one may speculate that Abu Khabab was radicalized during his years at Alexandria University. However, it is also possible that he was already moving in that direction long before his entry into the university. Nevertheless, his turn to Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) in the late 1970s signals a significant advancement in his religious and political views.

⁵ Hanley, "Obscure al-Qaeda Chemist Worries Experts." It may also be that Abu Khabab – whose name literally means "Father of Khabab" – has a son with that name as well.

⁶ Harmony Document AFGP-2002-001111

⁷ Hanley, "Obscure al-Qaeda Chemist Worries Experts."

⁸ Ibid.

Personal Traits

The nature of Abu Khabab's personal character, like many areas of his life, is largely unknown. Very few publicly available sources reveal even his appearance or temperament. Omar Nasiri provides some details about Abu Khabab's appearance in his book when he writes, "He was distinctive looking; instead of the traditional *pakol*, he was wearing a black turban. He wore glasses, and his beard was colored with henna."⁹ Evidence also points to a certain level of greed and arrogance in Abu Khabab's personal character, which appears to have put him at odds with other al-Qa'ida leaders and possibly caused greater friction within the organization. Specifically, Harmony documents reveal correspondence in which Abu Hafs rebukes Abu Khabab for breaking regulations by taking too much money for his family's trip to Egypt, refusing to give the account receipts and keeping the remaining money. Abu Hafs also writes that at a time when al-Qa'ida funds were running low Abu Khabab misappropriated funds by taking money for his sick and treating communal furniture as his own. In these documents we see that Abu Khabab also illegally removed a book from an al-Qa'ida library, refused to return it and threatened another al-Qa'ida member.¹⁰

Professional Experience

Abu Khabab's professional life appears to have begun in the Egyptian chemical weapons program upon graduation from university in 1975. Putting his degree to use, he gained knowledge and skills that would make him a valuable asset to both EIJ and al-Qa'ida. As he eventually left Egypt for Saudi Arabia in 1987, it is likely he worked approximately 8 years in this position. He joined Ayman al-Zawahiri in EIJ after turning against Anwar Sadat's government following the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty of 1979.¹¹ Evidence suggests that upon joining EIJ Abu Khabab did not immediately leave his post in the Egyptian weapons program. Rather, according to sources from the Islamic Observation Center in London, Khabab is said to have left Egypt in 1987 to travel to Saudi Arabia. From there he continued on to Afghanistan to join the jihad against the Soviet Union.¹²

Though the approximate date of his turn to EIJ and his departure for Egypt are known, his activities as an EIJ member remain obscured. Moreover, his whereabouts throughout the 1990s are also unknown. Given his journey to Afghanistan in 1987 it is highly likely that he participated in combat against the Soviet Union in the final years of the war. However, he may also have become involved in training mujahidin in explosives immediately after entering the country. Despite the lack of knowledge of his

⁹ Omar Nasiri, *Inside the Jihad: My Life with Al Qaeda: A Spy's Story* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2006), p. 223.

¹⁰ Harmony Document AFGP-2002-001111.

¹¹ Dan Darling, "Abu Khabab and Project al-Zabadi," *The Long War Journal*, September 19, 2005, available online at http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2005/09/abu_khabab_and_1.php (accessed 25 September 2007).

¹² Dan Darling, "Al Qaeda's Mad Scientist: The Significance of Abu Khabab's Death," *The Weekly Standard*, January 19, 2006, available online at <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/006/602zqghe.asp>. (accessed 1 October 2007).

activities during this period it is clear that he was sufficiently dedicated to EIJ and Zawahiri to follow the organization's merger with al-Qa'ida during the 1990s. It is only in the late 1990s when Abu Khabab's name re-appears in the historical record as the head of al-Qa'ida's al-Zabadi program.

Project Yoghurt

Project al-Zabadi (curdled milk or yoghurt in Arabic), al-Qa'ida's chemical weapons program, was initiated by Ayman al-Zawahiri in the late 1990s. Until that point the al-Qa'ida leadership apparently had not thought seriously of these weapons as viable options for terrorist attacks. The initiative to create such a program appears to have been inspired not by al-Qa'ida's leadership but by repeated statements by the American government and press on the simplicity of producing such weapons. A 1999 Zawahiri memo acknowledges that al-Qa'ida was slow to realize the potential of chemical and biological weapons as efficient means of terrorism and credits American press and government statements for inspiration. In the memo, Zawahiri writes, "We only became aware of them when the enemy drew our attention to them by repeatedly expressing concern that they can be produced simply."¹³

According to a rough timeline of the al-Zabadi project, compiled from information found in al-Qa'ida computers purchased by the Wall Street Journal in Kabul in late 2001, al-Zabadi was initiated in April 1999 by Zawahiri in a proposal memo emphasizing the terror potential of chemical and biological weapons. By May the Shura Council, al-Qa'ida's senior decision making body, approved approximately \$4,000 in funds to cover the startup costs of the project.¹⁴ Abu Khabab was then selected to head up the project and reportedly met with Zawahiri on at least one occasion to discuss nerve gas and chemical combinations for the most effective penetration of human skin. By the end of May 1999 Abu Khabab was receiving glowing appraisal reports from Zawahiri to the Shura Council for the high rate of the program's development.¹⁵

Al-Zabadi's headquarters were established in the Derunta Camp complex, located approximately 15 miles from Jalalabad, Afghanistan. At this location Abu Khabab led the efforts in weaponizing chemical materials. Perhaps he is most widely known for his role in the video tapes found by CNN journalists in the destroyed remains of the camp in summer of 2002. The videos depict chemical weapon experiments on caged dogs while Abu Khabab's voice can be heard giving instructions to other men in the room and describing the chemical's effects on the animals.

The specific type of chemical compound used in the experiment is unclear, resulting in varying opinions among experts. One of the main reasons for the debate is that the liquid used in the experiment is only briefly visible in the video while the method used to deploy the substance (a pump or pour mechanism) is not seen, making it impossible to determine the exact stage of weaponization. One expert held that the reaction of the dogs to the gas suggested a nerve agent like sarin. Another said the visible

¹³ Global Security Newswire. "Al-Qaeda: New Evidence of Chemical and Biological Weapons Pursuit," *NTI: Global Security Newswire*, January 2, 2002, available online at http://www.nti.org/d_newswire/issues/thisweek/2002_1_2_womd.html. (accessed 15 September 2007).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Darling, "Abu Khabab and Project al-Zabadi."

characteristics of the gas itself suggested something like cyanide. Other experts ruled out the possibility of mustard gas, a more common form of chemical weapon.¹⁶ According to CNN, journalists also found written recipes for sarin in addition to the video tapes. The Wall Street Journal also recovered documents with tables depicting lethal doses for poisons according to bodyweight as well as a list of lethal germs that could be used in developing biological weapons. These documents also contained instructions for manufacturing bombs from common household items.¹⁷

The technology and expertise required for the creation of chemical weapons is relatively simple in comparison to nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the process requires a high level of skill and knowledge. In the end Abu Khabab encountered certain problems in al-Zabadi, most notably a lack of specialists. He addressed this and other issues in a progress report, calling for the recruitment of students to infiltrate educational institutions in order to clandestinely gain access to needed expertise.¹⁸

Notable Pupils

Regardless of the difficulties Abu Khabab encountered as head of al-Zabadi, throughout his career he managed to achieve a certain level of success, especially in training mujahidin in the production of bombs. The number of his students who later went on to attempt and succeeded in carrying out a variety of deadly attacks on the United States and other countries speaks for itself.

Possibly the earliest attack perpetrated by Abu Khabab's pupils was the November 19, 1995 destruction of the Egyptian embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan. The plot, which he organized in cooperation with Ayman al-Zawahiri, was reportedly a response to an ongoing international crackdown against EIJ and was widely seen as an effort to take their fight to the international stage.¹⁹ The attack consisted of two different explosions detonated by car bombs. The first car rammed the embassy gate before setting of its explosive charge.²⁰ Later, a second bomb was detonated after a group of people had gathered to watch and help the injured from the first blast. In the end approximately 16 people were killed and another 60 were injured.²¹

Omar Nasiri, in his recent book recounting his experiences in Afghanistan's training camps, recalls hearing about the Islamabad attacks during his mujahidin training in Afghanistan. Long before the initiation of al-Zabadi, Nasiri was training in the

¹⁶ Nic Robertson, "Disturbing Scenes of Death Show Capability with Chemical Gas," *CNN*, August 19, 2002, available online at <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/US/08/19/terror.tape.chemical/index.html>. (accessed September 29, 2007).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Global Security Newswire. "Al-Qaeda: New Evidence of Chemical and Biological Weapons Pursuit."

¹⁹ Douglas Jehl, "Islamic Militants' War on Egypt: Going International," *New York Times*, November 20, 1995, available online at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=950DEEDF1339F933A15752C1A963958260>. (accessed 3 October 2007).

²⁰ "Suicide Bomber in Pakistan Kills 15 at Egypt's Embassy," *New York Times*, November 20, 1995, available online at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9506E7DE1339F933A15752C1A963958260>. (accessed 3 October 2007).

²¹ U.S. Department of State, "Significant Terrorist Incidents, 1961-2003: A Brief Chronology," <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/pubs/fs/5902.htm>. (accessed 3 October 2007).

Derunta camps where he recalls learning bomb making from curriculum materials developed by Abu Khabab; Nasiri admits having met Abu Khabab but claims to have never studied directly under him.²²

Richard Reid and Zacarias Moussaoui are two notable pupils of Abu Khabab. Reid, the so-called “shoe bomber,” was arrested after attempting to ignite a bomb hidden in his shoe on a December 22, 2001 flight from Paris to Miami. He was thought to have trained in the Derunta camp under Abu Khabab’s tutelage in the late 1990s. Reid is currently serving a life sentence for his crimes. Moussaoui, a co-conspirator in the September 11, 2001 attacks is also reported to have trained in the Derunta camp under Abu Khabab.²³

The “millenium bomber,” Ahmed Ressay, who attempted to attack Los Angeles International Airport on New Year’s Eve, 1999 is another name frequently associated with Abu Khabab.²⁴ Ressay used the knowledge gained from Abu Khabab’s instruction to gather and assemble materials for explosives in a motel near Vancouver, British Columbia. His plan was then to drive his explosives the length of the West coast of the United States to Los Angeles. In the end he was apprehended in the small town of Port Angeles, Washington after being stopped by customs officials while disembarking from the car ferry from Victoria, British Columbia.

A group of men in Yemen who planned and carried out the bombing of the USS Cole in October 2000 in the port of Aden have also been associated with Abu Khabab and his training program in Afghanistan.²⁵

Abu Khabab’s other notable links include a group of would-be terrorists in France and the UK who were arrested in early February 2003 under suspicion of planning chemical and biological attacks in France and the United Kingdom. The men had managed to acquire the materials necessary to make such weapons but were arrested before they could follow through on their plans. According to the French Interior Ministry anti-terrorism office, the suspects include graduates of Abu Khabab’s Derunta camp in Afghanistan and camps in the Pankisi Gorge area of Georgia.²⁶

Abu Khabab was also known to have worked with other leaders in the al-Qa’ida organization. In addition to Ayman al-Zawahiri, he worked closely with poison expert Abu Mus’ab al-Suri to train operatives in poisons and chemicals.²⁷ Evidence of their working relationship is available in Harmony documents in which the two men discuss placement of students in training camps.²⁸ These documents also show that Abu Khabab maintained a working relationship with Abu Hafis al-Misri and accepted members of such

²² Nasiri, *Inside the Jihad*, p. 223.

²³ Habibullah Khan and Brian Ross, “U.S. Strike Killed Al Qaeda Bomb Maker: Terror Big also Trained ‘Shoe Bomber,’ Moussaoui,” *ABC News*, January 18, 2006, available online at <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/Investigation/story?id=1517986>. (accessed 23 October 2007).

²⁴ Stephen Ulph, “Al-Qaeda’s Weapons Specialist Killed in Pakistani Airstrike,” *The Jamestown Foundation Global Terrorism Analysis* 3:3 (January 25, 2006): http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?issue_id=3596.

²⁵ Hanley, “Obscure al-Qaeda Chemist Worries Experts.”

²⁶ Sheila Mac Vicar, “European Terror Suspects Got Al Qaeda Training, Sources Say,” *CNN*, February 6, 2003. Available online at <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/02/06/sprj.irq.alqaeda.links/> (accessed 17 September 2007).

²⁷ “Mustafa Stemariam Nasar.” *MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base*, <http://www.tkb.org/KeyLeader.jsp?memID=6065>. (accessed 2 October 2007).

²⁸ Harmony Document AFGP-2002-001111.

organizations as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Peshawar Islamic Center for participation in his training program.²⁹

In addition to his work with poisons and chemicals there are also reports that hint at attempts to use radiological materials. Specifically, a 2004 report in an Egyptian newspaper suggests that Abu Khabab may have successfully constructed a radiological dispersal device.³⁰ If this report is true it speaks more to al-Qa'ida's ability to acquire radiological materials and Abu Khabab's talent as a bomb maker rather than his knowledge of nuclear power and weaponry.

Presumed Death

Abu Khabab was thought to have been killed at age 52 on January 13, 2006 during a CIA Predator drone attack. According to initial reports by Pakistani officials, he and several other militants were killed when missiles launched from the drone struck the home in the Damadola village of Pakistan's Bajaur region where they were meeting.³¹ Though presumed a casualty, he was not the intended target of the CIA missile attack. The primary target was reportedly Ayman al-Zawahiri, who either survived the attack or did not attend the meeting. Instead of Zawahiri, initial reports indicated that the missile blasts claimed the lives of Abu Khabab and a handful of other senior al-Qa'ida leaders including 'Abd al-Rahman al-Maghribi, Zawahiri's Moroccan son-in-law and head of al-Qa'ida's media operations; Abu 'Ubayda al-Misri, al-Qa'ida's chief of operations for the eastern Afghan province of Kunar; and possibly Khalid Habib, head of al-Qa'ida's operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan.³²

Since January 2006 Abu Khabab's death has been called into question by a Washington Post article covering the state of al-Qa'ida's central leadership six years after the September 11 attacks. The article cites unnamed U.S. and Pakistani officials who now believe that he and the others were never in the targeted home.³³ It is also suggested that Abu Khabab may still be at large given the fact that the \$5 million bounty on his head, as advertised on the U.S. State Department's Rewards for Justice website, remains on offer.³⁴

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Muhammad Wajdi Qandyl, "Searching for Weapons of Mass Destruction and Al-Qa'ida," *Al-Akhbar* (Cairo), January 18, 2004.

³¹ Rana Jawad, "Musharraf Says Zawahiri Escaped, Relative Killed in 13 Jan US Air Strike," *Agence France-Presse*, February 12, 2006.

³² "Bajaur Airstrike – Three Qaeda Militants Identified," *Daily Times* (Pakistan), January 20, 2006 available online at http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2006%5C01%5C20%5Cstory_20-1-2006_pg7_12. (Accessed 15 September 2007).

³³ Craig Whitlock. "The New Al-Qaeda Central," *The Washington Post*, Sept. 9, 2007.

³⁴ Rewards For Justice, http://www.rewardsforjustice.net/english/index.cfm?page=Midhat_Mursi.

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