

Abu Hafs al-Masri



Judging by the praise heaped upon him by other jihadis, Abu Hafs al-Masri¹ was one of al-Qa'ida's most talented, trusted, and militant members. Truly in Osama bin Laden's inner circle, he had been involved with al-Qa'ida since its inception and served as its military commander and security chief.² He was present at several key moments in the formation of al-Qa'ida and even sat at bin Laden's side during his infamous press conference in 1998 when bin Laden formally established the formation of the "World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders."³ As al-Qa'ida's military commander, Abu Hafs' key duties were recruiting, vetting, and training new al-Qa'ida members as well as planning and facilitating terrorist attacks. He was involved in organizing some of the group's more spectacular attacks, including the U.S Embassy bombings in East Africa and 9/11. His importance and influence on Osama bin Laden and the al-Qa'ida organization cannot be overstressed. In fact, ten months before Abu Hafs' death, bin Laden personally nominated him as his replacement.⁴

While little is known about his childhood years, it is believed that Abu Hafs was born in Menoufya, Egypt on June 17, 1944. Little else is mentioned about his upbringing or teenage years. Most information about him begins as a young adult when he lived in the Asyut region of Egypt. There he was briefly a student at Asyut University, but soon dropped out after he became involved with the militant Islamist group Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ). In 1980, he entered the police force with the intention of infiltrating its ranks in order to help EIJ militants seize weapons for their struggle against the government. Fearing eventual capture and exposure as an EIJ member, he moved to

¹ He is most commonly referred to as Abu Hafs and Muhammed Atef. Allegedly his real name is Subhi Abu-Sittah, but his other aliases include Subhi Abd-al-Aziz Abu-Sittah, Sheikh Tasser Abdullah, Taysir, Abu Fatima and Al Khafir.

² Abu Hafs' daughter married Osama bin Laden's son Mohammed in February, 2001, further cementing their strong personal and professional relationship.

³ Wright, *The Looming Tower*. pp. 131-133.

⁴ "Profile: Abu Hafs al-Masri," Al Jazeera.net, May 10, 2004, <http://english.aljazeera.net/English/archive/archive?ArchiveId=2379>.

Cairo where he was eventually imprisoned and sentenced to five years for his subversive activities.⁵

Although much of the information available supports the assumption that he was indeed an Egyptian policeman and a member of EIJ, some dispute these claims. For example, in a 2001 *Guardian* interview, Montasser al-Zayat, an Islamist lawyer and former associate of Ayman al-Zawahiri, suggested that Abu Hafs was not one of the EIJ members swept up after the assassination of Sadat. In the same article, Egyptian Interior Ministry officials state that Abu Hafs was never a policeman and had no arrests prior to leaving for Afghanistan.⁶ Regardless of what the truth is about his background, Abu Hafs eventually left Egypt to travel to South Asia in order to join the anti-Soviet jihad, and later, al-Qa'ida.

Abu Hafs likely arrived in Pakistan and later Afghanistan during the mid-1980s. Once in Peshawar, Pakistan, he linked up with Osama bin Laden and Abdullah Azzam and became involved in their Maktab al-Khidmat, or Services Bureau, which facilitated jihadis' travels to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets. Bin Laden personally authorized a \$200-a-month salary for Hafs' work at the Services Bureau starting in early 1987.⁷ However, he was not satisfied with just playing a supporting role in the jihad and eventually decided to join the fighting in Afghanistan. Bin Laden, Abu Hafs and several other Arab jihadis left Peshawar and established one of the first all-Arab camps in Jaji, Afghanistan called the Masada (Lion's Den). The camp was located in close proximity to a large Soviet Army garrison and eventually Soviet forces attacked the Lion's Den in mid-1997. A month-long battle ensued with the Soviets initially gaining the upper hand, but they eventually retreated after several counterattacks by the Arabs. It was after this battle that Osama bin Laden, Abu Hafs, Abu Ubaydah al-Banshiri, and other Afghan-Arabs began attracting widespread attention in the Arab world for their "heroic efforts."⁸ Already battle-proven and fully dedicated to jihad, Abu Hafs undoubtedly made a huge impression on Osama bin Laden. Perhaps as a reward and a token of gratitude, bin Laden then designated him as al-Qa'ida's security chief responsible for bin Laden's safety and the screening of guests. During this period of time, Abu Hafs also held the role of the number two military commander behind Abu Ubaydah.⁹

Abu Hafs followed bin Laden to the Sudan in 1992, where he continued to help actively plan and coordinate training, plot terrorist attacks, and set up al-Qa'ida cells. In

⁵ Zaynah, "Muhammed Atif, Defendant Accused of Planning the 11 September Attacks and Al-Aq'ida Organization's Military Official," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, October 8, 2001; "Profile: Abu Hafs al-Masri," "Atef, Muhammed, MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Database, January 16, 2007, <http://www.tkb.org/KeyLeader.jsp?memID=5823>.

⁶ Dawoud, "Mohammed Atef," *The Guardian*, November 19, 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/waronterror/story/0,,597355,00.html>; Muhammed Salah, "Egypt Supplies United States with Information About 'Abu-Hafs,'" *Al-Hayah*, December 6, 1998;

⁷ A raid on the al-Haramayn office in Sarajevo in 2002 produced a document from a laptop that supports the claim that Abu Hafs was one of the first, future members of al-Qa'ida to be involved in the Services Bureau; Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, p. 77.

⁸ Wright, p. 116-120.

⁹ Rahimullah Yusufzai, "An Insider's Guide to bin Laden's Shadowy Cabinet," *The Sunday Times*, September 30, 2001.

1992 and 1993, bin Laden sent him to Somalia to make contact with local tribes and give them assistance in their fight against United Nations and U.S. forces involved in Operation Restore Hope. Abu Hafs apparently returned to Peshawar sometime in 1993, where he tasked and prepared several al-Qa'ida members for missions into Kenya, Somalia, and Ogaden to recon sites and establish training camps. He then returned to Africa where he visited his teams in Somalia and offered help to the Somali Islamic Union.¹⁰ However, in late 1993, Abu Hafs ordered some of those same camps closed due to security and other problems.¹¹ He also helped establish cover companies in Nairobi and Mombassa, Kenya, in order to fund al-Qa'ida's African operations.¹² Abu Hafs often met and guided other top al-Qa'ida members and trainers while in Africa and helped plot the bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. Although five years before the actual attacks occurred, Abu Hafs met with Ali Mohammed, another Egyptian al-Qa'ida member, and Osama bin Laden in Khartoum, Sudan, in 1993 to discuss Mohammed's recon efforts of Western embassies in Nairobi.¹³ In 1996, Abu Hafs became the primary military commander of al-Qa'ida after Abu Ubaydah died in a ferry accident on Lake Victoria. In that same year, al-Qa'ida was kicked out of the Sudan and moved its operations back to Afghanistan.

During his tenure as military chief in Afghanistan, Abu Hafs' main responsibilities were to oversee the training at terrorist camps and make decisions regarding which trainees would receive additional instruction (in assassinations, urban warfare, bomb and poison making, etc.) after their initial training. He also hand-picked the operatives who would take part in suicide attacks, as well as the bodyguards for bin Laden.¹⁴ Abu Hafs paid special attention to Western converts, Muslims from Western European countries, and non-Arab trainees as they possessed freedom of movement through their home countries that other members did not. He met with Jose Padilla several times, tasking him first with exploding apartment buildings in the US.¹⁵ Abu Hafs also met with John Walker Lindh and sent Zacarias Moussaoui to Malaysia to work with Jemaah Islamiah.¹⁶ Lastly and most ominously, Abu Hafs was one of the most adamant members concerning the group's procurement, production, and use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Although it probably did not take too much effort, he eventually convinced Osama bin Laden to pursue the procurement and production of WMD agents.¹⁷

In mid-1996, Abu Hafs and Osama bin Laden met with Khalid Sheikh Muhammed (KSM) in Tora Bora, Afghanistan. Although he was not an "official" al-Qa'ida member at the time, KSM discussed several possible plots, including using

¹⁰ Harmony, AFGP-2002-600104.

¹¹ Harmony, AFGP-2002-600110; Harmony, AFGP-2002-800597.

¹² Bergen, pp. 211, 214-215, 221; Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin, eds., *Anti-American Terrorism and the Middle East*, p. 211; *USA vs. bin Laden et al.*

¹³ Rubin, p. 209.

¹⁴ Bergen, p. 264.

¹⁵ Remarks of Deputy Attorney General James Comey Regarding Jose Padilla, June 1, 2004, <http://www.usdoj.gov/dag/speech/2004/dag6104.htm>.

¹⁶ Bergen, p. 277; *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 151.

¹⁷ Wright, p. 304.

airplanes as missiles, to attack targets inside the United States. KSM's ideas must have struck a cord with Abu Hafs, who two years later, would push Osama bin Laden to act on KSM's vision. This plan, obviously, became the 9/11 attacks. In fact, Abu Hafs, Osama bin Laden, and KSM were the only al-Qa'ida members to be involved in target selection for 9/11.¹⁸

Fortunately, Abu Hafs was killed in an al-Qa'ida safehouse in Kabul, Afghanistan, in November of 2001, when it was bombed by coalition aircraft. This was a significant blow to al-Qa'ida, as they lost one of their most stalwart and capable members. Moreover, it was a huge loss to bin Laden who lost not only his senior military commander, but also a close companion who had been with him since the very beginning of the al-Qa'ida organization.¹⁹

¹⁸ *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, pp.148-150; Wright, pp. 307-308; Bergen, pp.300-301.

¹⁹ Other Harmony documents that contain information on Abu Hafs: AFGP-2002-003677 and AFGP-2002-800573.

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