

Abu ‘Ubayda al-Banshiri

Ali Amin ‘Ali al-Rashidi, better known as Abu ‘Ubayda al-Banshiri, was born in May of 1950 in Cairo, Egypt. At 46, he was al-Qa’ida’s military commander and second-in-command when he perished in a ferry accident on Lake Victoria on May 21, 1996. After acquiring his *nom de guerre* in Afghanistan while fighting the Soviets in the 1980s, al-Rashidi became a founding member of al-Qa’ida. He was intimately involved in al-Qa’ida’s expansion to the African continent, as well as the operational planning of their activities there.

Al-Rashidi’s documented history begins with the assassination of Anwar al-Sadat in October of 1981. ‘Abd al-Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam, al-Rashidi’s future brother-in-law, was one of the several assassins along with a National Police officer.¹ The assassins were members of an early incarnation of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, also called al-Jihad. In the ensuing crackdown on radicalism, al-Rashidi was dismissed from his job as a National Police officer, and arrested briefly for exhibiting extremist tendencies and having alleged ties to al-Jihad.²

In 1983, al-Rashidi married Hafsah Sa’d Rashwan, the sister of ‘Abd al-Salam’s wife. According to testimony provided by al-Rashidi’s wife, his involvement in jihad actually began shortly after this time. She states that they were in a poor financial situation two months after their marriage, during which time he was working in construction but contemplating a move to Saudi Arabia. They quickly did so, spending a month in a home in Jeddah owned by Usama bin Ladin followed by ten days in Medina in a home owned by Muhammad Matawi. At this time al-Rashidi expressed interest in continuing on to Pakistan; a third party procured tickets for him and his family along with a work contract for employment with a relief agency. Hafsah Sa’d Rashwan learned later that the tickets were of the reduced-priced variety reserved for mujahidin who intended to use Peshawar, Pakistan as an interim stop on their way to fight in Afghanistan.³

Upon his arrival in Peshawar, al-Rashidi began training at the “Sada” camp and assumed his first alias, Abu ‘Ubayda.⁴ This training camp was apparently a precursor to the more robust organizational enterprise established by Bin Ladin in 1988 known as the Masada, or Lion’s Den.⁵ There al-Rashidi met and befriended Ayman al-Zawahiri, who introduced him to Bin Ladin. Al-Rashidi’s wife believes that her husband’s “energy and the combat experience he had gained from his previous job” impressed Bin Ladin.

Over time, al-Rashidi received training in other camps, including al-Qadisiyah in Jalalabad, and eventually was put in charge of training at multiple camps. He was also responsible for running a group house for mujahidin and their families in Pakistan,

¹ “Report Profiles Egyptian Jihad’s Figure,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 7, 2000 [FBIS Translation].

² “Bin-Laden Associate Interrogated,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 24, 1999 [FBIS Translation].

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “History of Bin-Ladin’s al-Qa’idah Viewed,” *Al-Hayah*, October 12, 1998 [FBIS Translation].

possibly in Hyderabad.⁶ Marc Sagemen reports that Zawahiri and Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, aka Dr. al Fadl, recruited al-Rashidi into Egyptian Islamic Jihad sometime after 1986.⁷ Al-Rashidi's wife's testimony fails to mention this, but even more conspicuous is the absence of any mention of the combat experience her husband gained in Afghanistan and Pakistan during this time period.

Al-Rashidi's assumption of greater responsibilities and recognition at the various training camps financed by Usama bin Ladin were likely due to his active participation in the jihad against the Soviets. He was one of the first foreign jihadists to engage in true combat with the Soviets, and one of the only to fight alongside the Afghan mujahidin as well as the foreign jihadists. He was able to overcome the ideological and ethnic barriers which typically separated the two groups from one another. A member of the Arab mujahidin's shura council in the late 1980s in Peshawar, stated that al-Rashidi was well-liked, and had voiced concern about the debilitating effects of internecine disputes among the jihadists.⁸ Even more significant than his calls for unity, however, is the fact that he was a compatriot of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Lion of the Panjshir. It is this relationship cultivated in the Panjshir Valley that spawned the second half of al-Rashidi's most common monicker, Abu 'Ubayda al-Banshiri.⁹

Al-Rashidi cemented his reputation among the foreign jihadists in 1987 in the same battle that forged Bin Ladin's reputation as a military hero. Near Jaji, a town in the Paktia province of Pakistan along a mujahidin supply line and close to the Masada camp, Bin Ladin and al-Rashidi lead approximately fifty foreign jihadists in one of their most significant battles.¹⁰ Approximately two hundred Soviet troops, purportedly including elite Spetsnaz soldiers, were repelled repeatedly over the course of a week-long siege. Although they eventually conceded their position, the jihadists claimed a much-celebrated victory over the conventional forces.¹¹

Shortly after the battle of Jaji, the organization that would come to be known as al-Qa'ida had its inception in Afghanistan. Al-Rashidi was present at the creation, along with Usama bin Ladin, Wael Julaidan and Mamdouh Mahmud Salim. During the four day meeting from 17-20 August 1988, the co-founders expressed their disappointment in Maktab al-Khidamat, the organization largely responsible for the foreign jihadists' logistics in Afghanistan, and enumerated qualities for potential members of a new organization.¹² In late 1989, the organization's first recruits pledged allegiance at the al-

⁶ "Bin Laden Associate Interrogated."

⁷ Marc Sagemen, *Understanding Terror Networks*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p. 34.

⁸ "History of Bin Laden's Al-Qa'ida Viewed."

⁹ "Former Bin Laden 'Bodyguard' Discusses Al-Qa'ida Figures, Views East Africa Bombings," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, March 28, 2005 [FBIS Translation]. "Banshir" is the Arabic equivalent of "Panjshir."

¹⁰ Peter Bergen, *Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden*, (New York: The Free Press, 2001), pp. 56-57.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² "Founders Meet and Form al-Qaeda" at GlobalSecurity.org, available at http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/profiles/founders_meet_and_form_al-qaeda.htm, and, *Unites States v. Enaam Arnaout, et al.*, District of Northern Illinois, No. 02, Cr. 892, indictment, April 2002, available at <http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/iln/indict/2002/02cr892.pdf>.

Farouq training camp in the Paktia province of Afghanistan. Al-Rashidi was present for this as well, along with Usama bin Ladin, Muhammad Atef, Abu Ayoub al-Iraqi, Jamal Ahmed al-Fadl, and possibly others. At the meeting, the idea of taking the jihad beyond Afghanistan was discussed.¹³

The naming of al-Qa'ida was a less deliberate action than the cultivation of the idea to wage jihad against the far enemy. In an interview with Usama bin Ladin conducted on 21 October 2001, he states that "That particular name is very old. It was born without any intention from us. Brother Abu Ubayda al-Banshiri created a military base to train the young men to fight against the vicious, arrogant, brutal, terrorizing, Soviet empire, which was a truth to all observers. So this place was called "The Base" [al-Qai 'da], as in a training base, so this name grew and became [sic]."¹⁴

In 1990, senior al-Qa'ida leaders considered moving the organization to Sudan. They felt they could exploit the ascendancy of the National Islamic Front in Sudan, whereas they saw little for them remaining to do in Afghanistan.¹⁵ Al-Rashidi's wife stated that they left Pakistan in late 1992 for the Bayt al-Shabab region of Yemen. They remained there for ten months before moving to Omdurman, Sudan, where al-Rashidi was placed in charge of the al-Qa'ida cell in Yemen.

Following a reconnaissance mission performed by Muhammed Atef, al-Rashidi ordered Mohamed Suleiman al-Nalfi to send a portion of his Sudanese cell to Somalia.¹⁶ In the Spring of 1993, al-Banshiri participated in a meeting with Usama bin Ladin during which they decided that al-Qa'ida should target U.S. forces in Somalia. He told al-Fadl to prepare to go to Somalia as well to begin offering assistance and training to the Somali tribes opposed to UN intervention.¹⁷ According to a U.S. indictment against Usama bin Ladin, al-Rashidi was one of eight men who would eventually provide military training to Somalis.¹⁸

A former bodyguard of Usama bin Ladin stated, "The al-Qa'ida organization mujahidin did not enter Somalia after the United States did. Indeed, the al-Qa'ida organization mujahidin were already there when the United States entered because they had a program and camps and a vision to unify the country. They aspired to make Somalia a stronghold for them close to the Arabian Peninsula. . . ." This same man described al-Rashidi as

¹³ *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, S(7) 98 Cr. 1023, S.D.N.Y., trial transcript, February 6, 2001, testimony of Jamal al-Fadl, and, *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, S(7) 98 Cr. 1023, S.D.N.Y., trial transcript, February 20, 2001, testimony of Jamal al-Fadl.

¹⁴ "Discussion on the New Crusader Wars," Tayseer Allouni with Usamah bin Laden, October 21, 2001, available at http://www.terrorisme.net/doc/qaida/001_ubl_interview_a.htm.

¹⁵ Jamal al-Fadl Testimony, February 6, 2001.

¹⁶ *Anatomy of a Terrorist Attack: An In-Depth Investigation Into the 1998 Bombings of the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania*, Matthew B. Ridgway Center for Security Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 2005, p. 53, available at http://www.ridgway.pitt.edu/docs/working_papers/Anatomy%20v6--FINAL%20DOCUMENT.pdf.

¹⁷ Jamal al-Fadl Testimony, February 6, 2001.

¹⁸ The other seven were Muhammed Atef, Mohamed Sadeek Odeh, Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, Saif al-Adel, Mushin Musa Matwalli Atwah, and Ahmed Mohammed Hamed Ali; *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, Indictment, November 4, 1998, and updates.

“far-sighted,” and the “general field commander in the Horn of Africa. . . . He was the supervisor of activities . . . from Uganda to Somalia and from Kenya to the Horn of Africa and Sudan.” Finally, he asserted that al-Rashidi was “the executive commander” and strongest advocate for the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.¹⁹

Al-Rashidi’s activities in East Africa included setting up businesses and humanitarian organizations as fronts for al-Qa’ida. He, Muhammed Atef, and Mohammed Sadiq Odeh established a fishing business in Mombassa, Kenya in 1994.²⁰ The *Nairobi Daily Nation* references a Global Witness report which states that between 1993 and 1997, al-Rashidi and Wadih al-Hage, al-Qa’ida’s senior facilitator in Kenya and former personal secretary to Bin Ladin, established precious gem, gold, and tanzanite companies to provide al-Qa’ida’s East African cells with financial independence and a claim to legitimacy.²¹

The FBI reports that al-Rashidi owned land in Mwanza, Tanzania. In 1993, he created Taheer Ltd., which Global Witness believes laundered money earned in the illegal diamond industry. In 1994, al-Hage followed suit and established Tanzanite King, a company that mined and sold gemstones, after selling diamonds in Kenya for al-Rashidi.²² Al-Hage listed Aadil Habib, an alias for al-Rashidi, as one of Tanzanite King’s local officers. Both al-Rashidi and al-Hage were also associated with non-governmental organizations in the horn of Africa, including Mercy International Relief Agency and Help Africa People.²³

Although he was instrumental in laying the groundwork for the eventual attacks, al-Rashidi would not live to see the simultaneous bombings of the U.S. Embassies. On May 21, 1996, a steam ferry sank off the coast of Mwanza in Lake Victoria, killing al-Rashidi along with approximately 1,000 other passengers. One source claims that he was attempting to obtain material for a dirty bomb when he was killed.²⁴ Ayman al-Zawahiri’s brother informed al-Rashidi’s wife that he was making preparations for an attack when he was martyred, although in her testimony she did not indicate any knowledge of the nature of al-Rashidi’s undertakings.²⁵ Upon his death, al-Rashidi was succeeded by Muhammed Atef as al-Qa’ida’s military commander.

¹⁹ “Former Bin Laden ‘Bodyguard’ Discusses al-Qa’ida Figures.”

²⁰ *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, Indictment, November 4, 1998, and, “Atef and al-Banshiri Meet with Odeh,” at GlobalSecurity.org, available at http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/profiles/atef_and_al-banshiri_meet_with_odeh.htm.

²¹ “Kenya: Paper explores possible link between terrorism, illegal gemstone trade,” *Nairobi Daily Nation*, June 22, 2003 [FBIS Translation].

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Anatomy of a Terrorist Attack*, p.56.

²⁴ Christopher Brown, “WMD Mystery: Examining Important Connections,” *National Review On-line*, May 10, 2005, available at www.nationalreview.com/comment/brown200505100812.asp.

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