

Saif al-Adel



[Saif al-Adel, used in US wanted posters]

Life in Egypt

Saif al-Adel (سيف العدل; also spelled Sayf al-`Adl, Seif al-Adil)¹, often called the third-ranking official of al-Qa`ida, is a man about whom there is extremely little that is known with certainty.² His date of birth is April 11, 1960 or April 11, 1963. Since the identity behind his *nom de guerre* is unknown, it is impossible to say anything about his family or childhood. There is some indication that he did not have a traditional Islamic education, or if he did that it was not very extensive; in his 2005 memoir about Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, Saif writes that he is partly using an abundance of free time to memorize the Qur`an, a task to which primary Islamic education is almost exclusively devoted.³ In the same memoir, Saif writes that “God guided me to comprehend pure Islam in the early 1980s,” an indication that his turn to radical Islamism occurred in his early twenties.

At that time Saif had probably already begun his career in the Egyptian army, since by 1987 he had achieved the rank of colonel in the Special Forces.⁴ In the Spring of 1987 Saif was arrested and charged in Cairo in what was called National Security Case

¹ Though sometimes conflated, Saif al-Adel is *not* the same person as Sayf al-Islam al-Misri or Sayf al-Din al-Ansari. The former is an al-Qa`ida colleague of Saif al-Adel and the author of a 1994 report on al-Qa`ida operations in Somalia and Ethiopia called “The Ogaden File,” Harmony, AFGP-2002-600104, in which Sayf al-Islam mentions attending a meeting at which Saif al-Adel was also present. Sayf al-Din al-Ansari is a jihadi ideologue and part of the circle of Saudi jihadi authors that includes Abu Sa`d al-`Amili, Abu `Ubayd al-Qurashi and Abu Ayman al-Hilali; his specific relationship with al-Qa`ida is unclear. One of the more prominent confluations of these individuals appears in the MSNBC profile of Saif al-Adel, where his full name is given as “Saif al-Din al-Ansari al-Adel” (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8336988/>).

² For the purposes of this profile, “known” refers to what is available in open source documents and in declassified documents from the Harmony database; some of the latter used in this profile are not currently available to the public.

³ Saif al-Adel, “Detained Al-Qa`ida Leader Sayf al-Adl Chronicles Al-Zarqawi’s Rise in Organization,” hereafter “Zarqawi memoir.” The Arabic original of this memoir can be found at numerous websites and was published in Husayn, *al-Zarqawi al-jil al-thani li’l-Qa`ida*. An English translation can be found here: <http://atc2005.blogspot.com/2006/06/al-zarqawi-second-generation-of-al.html>.

⁴ According to his Zarqawi memoir.

401, in connection with which thousands of Islamist activists were arrested, and was charged with the crime of attempting to revive the Jihad Organization (*tanzim al-jihad*), which six years earlier had been responsible for the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, and of attempting to assassinate former Egyptian Interior Minister Hasan al-Basha and journalist Makram Muhammad Ahmad.⁵ It was also claimed at the trial that he had been involved in a plot to destroy the Egyptian Parliament building by simultaneously driving a bomb-laden truck into the building and crashing a hijacked airplane into it as well. On May 6, with more than 400 others charged in the case, Saif was sent to prison; in his Zaraqawi memoir he states that one of his fellow inmates was Major Muhammad al-Baram of the Special Forces and Special Guard.

Already at this point in his jihadi career Saif exhibited a tendency toward independence of mind and divisiveness. He writes that, at the time of Case 401,

“I found that the brothers at the Al-Jihad movement and the Islamic Group lacked practical experience that could enable them to achieve the desired change [of society]. In my opinion and the opinion of some brothers, this was due to over-enthusiasm that resulted in hasty action or recklessness at times.”⁶

This disagreement with the Egyptian Islamist groups, along with the growing success of Egyptian and Jordanian security services in infiltrating such groups, led Saif to leave Egypt for Saudi Arabia in 1988, travelling from there to Pakistan.⁷

1990s: Military Trainer for al-Qa’ida

Soon after travelling to South Asia Saif became directly involved in the activities of the nascent al-Qa’ida movement. In the first two years of the 1990s he was based in Peshawar, Pakistan, making trips across the Afghan border to serve during this period as a trainer at the Jihad Wal camp, near Khost, Afghanistan. L’Housseine Kherchtou testified to having received explosives training from Saif there in 1991 or ’92.⁸ At some point in 1992, Saif travelled to Khartoum and conducted explosives training at the Damazine Farm.⁹ In late 1992 Saif told Mohammed Odeh that, as the war in Afghanistan was winding down, al-Qa’ida was going to “move the jihad to other parts of the world,”

⁵ In an interview with the newspaper *al-Wasat* in November 1993 (http://www.mettransparent.com/texts/makkawi_interview_november.htm), Muhammad Makkawi stated that the group responsible for this assassination attempt was called al-Najun min al-Nar (“Saved from the Fire”). Saif may have been a member of this group. (The question of whether Saif is or is not Makkawi is controversial and involves much conflicting information.)

⁶ Zaraqawi memoir. Saif would later and on numerous occasions criticize the senior al-Qa’ida leadership for the same faults; see al-Shafi’i, “al-Usuliyun yuhasisun,” and “Al-Adl Letter,” http://ctc.usma.edu/aq/Al%20Adl%20Letter_Translation.pdf.

⁷ “al-Qa’id al-’askari al-jadid.” This is also said of Muhammad Makkawi, and it may be that this date and itinerary are true of the latter and *not* of Saif, who may very well have travelled to Pakistan in 1989 or ’90.

⁸ *U.S. vs. Usama Bin Laden, et. al*, day 8, February 21, 2001, p. 1134

⁹ *U.S. v. Usama Bin Laden et al.*, testimony of Jamal al-Fadl, day 2, February 6, 2001, pp. 244f.

and he directed Odeh to go to Somalia via Kenya.¹⁰ This is a clear indication that Saif had attained a relatively high position within the organization by this time, and indeed Kherchtou testified that Saif was then already a member of al-Qa'ida's military committee.¹¹ On January 20, 1993, along with seven other operatives, he was present at a meeting in the home of Abu Hafis to discuss a plan to establish training camps in Somalia and the Ogaden region of Ethiopia.¹² Sayf al-Islam al-Misri was given the task of leading the first team into Somalia, while Saif al-Adel remained in Pakistan; Sayf al-Islam left for Africa on February 4.¹³ Later that Spring Saif al-Adel journeyed there as well.

The first datable piece of evidence for placing Saif in Somalia is a letter by Abu'l-Walid addressed to him from Jihad Wal, dated 30 September 1993.¹⁴ This letter mentions the fact that two prior letters from Saif in Somalia were received by Abu'l-Walid. The latter writes as Saif's superior, refers to Saif as "young man," and signs off "your uncle." Abu'l-Walid, whose real name is Musatafa Hamid (مصطفى حامد), was joined to Saif by marriage at some point during the 1990s.¹⁵ Abu'l-Walid opens his 1993 letter "greetings to you and to your dear family," perhaps indicating that Saif's wife and children¹⁶ had accompanied him to Africa. Abu'l-Walid's letter alludes to the fact that Saif's earlier letters had dealt with matters of a "military aspect," including the observation that there was a shortage of weaponry and ammunition in the region at the time. Abu'l-Walid refers to the recent arrival of U.S. forces in Somalia and urges Saif to strike at the "bald eagle."¹⁷

In a report dated 17 January 1994 and signed "Saif al-Adel," Saif describes some of his operations in Somalia, recommends that al-Qa'ida purchase a launch in order to unload materiel from an awaited ship, discusses the feasibility of establishing an operational and training camp in the al-Hadidiyah forest, and comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the local Islamist leadership that his cell was working with in the

¹⁰ *U.S. vs. Usama Bin Laden, et. al*, day 12, testimony of Special Agent John Anticev, pp. 1642f. Odeh went from Pakistan to Nairobi in March of '93.

¹¹ *U.S. vs. Usama Bin Laden, et. al*, day 8, February 21, 2001, p. 1123.

¹² Sayf al-Islam, "The Ogaden file." Also present at the meeting were Abu Qutayba al-Maghribi, Abu Jihad al-Nubi, Abu Yusuf al-Maghribi, Abu Thammam, Abu Islam al-Saghir and Abu Khalid al-Misri.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Harmony, AFGP-2002-600053, the first of five letters to the Africa Corps.

¹⁵ Shafi'i, "al-Zarqawi yukashif," on the basis of information provided by Nu'man bin 'Uthman, a Libyan Islamist and former jihadi based in London. See also al-Shafi'i, "al-USuliyun yusahihun ma'lumat."

¹⁶ In the Harmony document known as the "Al Adl Letter"

(http://ctc.usma.edu/aq/Al%20Adl%20Letter_Translation.pdf), probably by Saif though signed 'Abd al-Halim al-'Adl and dated 13 June 2002, he refers to a private letter addressed to Abu'l-Walid in which he asks the latter to pass on "greetings and kisses to my children." This letter was posted to the Internet in early 2002, but is no longer online. I was unable to locate a cached or archived copy of that letter at the time of writing, but according to the "Al Adl Letter" it included the names of Saif's children.

¹⁷ Kherchtou's testimony corroborates Saif's presence in Somalia during this period; he testified that Saif was among those "from al-Qaeda who were working in Somalia and that were traveling through Nairobi," and that it was Saif who informed the members of the cell in Kenya about the drowning of Abu Ubayda al-Banshiri in May of 1994 (*U.S. vs. Usama Bin Laden, et. al*, day 8, February 21, 2001, pp. 1173 and 1264-6).

area.¹⁸ In an undated letter written in the same period and signed “Omar al-Sumali, formerly known as Saif al-Adel,” he provides a detailed geographical and ethnographic description of the Nairobi-Kamboni route and of the southern region of Somalia, including the tribal structure, briefly describes six small-scale terrorist operations carried out in the area, and ultimately recommends that al-Qa’ida establish a lasting presence in the area.¹⁹ This letter also evidences some degree of friction between Saif and his addressee, inasmuch as he asks toward the end of the letter that his correspondent “not delay, as you usually do, in making the appropriate decisions” regarding his recommendation to establish an al-Qa’ida base in the area.

The next piece of evidence for Saif’s whereabouts puts him in the Gulf; Khalid Sheikh Muhammad claims to have met with Saif in Yemen in 1995.²⁰ There is a letter from Saif to “Qari Saahib” dated 19 November 1997, asking for help in getting four people out of prison, but it does not mention where Saif is writing from.²¹ We next find him in South Asia, and he appears to have operated out of Afghanistan until the U.S.-led invasion in late 2001. Khalid Sheikh Muhammad admitted to having met with Saif and Muhammad Atef a number of times in Afghanistan in 1997 and ’98, “assisting them with computer and media projects.”²² In 1999, Saif worked as a trainer at the Mes Aynak training camp near Kabul, which had begun operations in the same year. Saif offered an advanced commando training course there.²³

It was also in 1999 that Saif began his—and al-Qa’ida’s—relationship with Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi (d. 6/7/2006). In his Zarqawi memoir Saif writes that he had learned about Zarqawi from articles by Abu Qatada al-Filistini in the latter’s London-based magazine *al-Minhaj*, and that he subsequently followed the news of the court case and imprisonment of Zarqawi and other Jordanian and Palestinian militants. Upon his release from Jordanian prison in 1999 Zarqawi moved to Peshawar, and soon thereafter travelled to Kandahar, Afghanistan to meet with al-Qa’ida officials. After meeting with Zarqawi and finding that he was a “hardliner” and in disagreement with certain aspects of al-Qa’ida’s ideology and practice, Saif asked Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri for the task of liaising with Zarqawi and overcoming their differences. The two al-Qa’ida chiefs appointed him to this task, and it was later agreed that al-Qa’ida would provide support for Zarqawi to establish an independent but al-Qa’ida-associated training camp in Herat, Afghanistan.²⁴ This location was chosen because of its proximity to Iran, since it had become easier by that time for mujahidin to enter Afghanistan through Iran than

¹⁸ Harmony, AFGP-2002-600114.

¹⁹ Harmony, AFGP-2002-600113; though not dated, it is very probable that this was written prior to the letter dated 17 January 1994, since the latter assumes a commitment on al-Qa’ida’s part to set down stakes in the area, while in the former Saif recommends that they do so.

²⁰ *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 489n. 9. Khalid disclosed neither the nature of their meeting nor whether he had any knowledge of Saif’s purpose in being in Yemen.

²¹ Or at least the English summary of the letter does not mention this; see p. 9 of Harmony, AFGP-2002-003677.

²² *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 149.

²³ *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 157.

²⁴ It was at this camp that Zarqawi established his *Jund al-Sham*, a jihadi militia composed of people drawn from Jordan, Syria, and other central Arab lands traditionally know as al-Sham; this group was infiltrated by Jordanian intelligence and scattered before the U.S. invasion.

through Pakistan. Saif established connections with sympathetic parties in Iran and set up way stations in Tehran and Mashhad for mujahidin bound for Afghanistan. Saif made frequent trips from Kandahar to Herat to observe and assist with Zarqawi's operations. He also used these opportunities to deepen his contacts in Iran, though he says that these were with "virtuous people" in Iran and not with the Iranian government.²⁵

2000s: 9/11 and the Iranian Refuge(?)

According to the Australian Federal Police, Saif was involved in early 2000 in the development of a plot to assassinate Australian mining magnate and orthodox rabbi Joseph Gutnick.²⁶ As he notes in his Zarqawi memoir, Saif and the rest of the al-Qa'ida leadership were also engaged in planning the 9/11 operation throughout the final years of the '90s and during the beginning of the new millennium. The planning was not always a harmonious process, however. In July of 2001, after it became known to the al-Qa'ida leadership that Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad `Umar was opposed to al-Qa'ida carrying out a direct attack on the United States, a split emerged between a number of the senior leaders. According to interrogations of several al-Qa'ida detainees, Saif was among those who agreed with Mullah `Umar and opposed Bin Laden.²⁷ Abu'l-Walid was also opposed to Bin Laden in this matter, according to writings of his discovered by the U.S. military in Kandahar.²⁸

Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October of 2001, Saif initially took a leading role in directing al-Qa'ida human resources in fighting the U.S. and Coalition forces. The Australian jihadi David Hicks—who was screened by Saif and Muhammad Atef in the Spring of 2001 before training at Tarnak Farms—reported to Saif in Kandahar in the immediate aftermath of the invasion and was directed to fight at the Kandahar Airport.²⁹ According to his Zarqawi memoir, it was soon decided that al-Qa'ida personnel should evacuate from Kandahar and go into hiding. While some of the leadership fled to the mountains on Afghanistan's eastern border, some went over the western border into Iran. Saif was in charge of this contingent, and he was assisted in Iran by members of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami.³⁰ Using money provided by supporters from the U.A.E., Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, Saif rented apartments in Iran for al-Qa'ida members and their families.

²⁵ Saif al-Adel, Zarqawi memoir.

²⁶ Symons, "Brigitte link to Gutnick death plot."

²⁷ *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 251. He was apparently joined in this opposition by Abu Hafis the Mauritanian and Shaykh Sa'id al-Misri.

²⁸ Shafi'i, "Shaqiqa zawja."

²⁹ "Charge sheet: Allegations against Hicks." See also the U.S. press release regarding its case against Hicks (available here: <http://cryptome.quintessenz.org/mirror/usa-v-hicks.htm>), where it is stated that Saif "was assigning individuals to locations where they were to fight alongside other al Qaida associates against U.S. and Coalition forces."

³⁰ Saif al-Adel, Zarqawi memoir. Hekmatyar had gone into exile in Iran in 1996 and was there until the Iranian government shut down the offices of Hezb-i Islami and expelled him in February of 2002, around the same time that it began to arrest al-Qa'ida membership then in the country.

Soon thereafter Saif reestablished contact with the al-Qa'ida leadership in Afghanistan and began to organize groups of fighters to return there and support the insurgency. Zarqawi and his group of Palestinian and Jordanian jihadis—the remnants of his Jund al-Sham—planned to make their way to Iraq, where the Ansar al-Islam group had offered support.³¹ In the first months of 2002, however, under pressure from the United States, the Iranian authorities began to detain some members of these groups, causing Saif to abort his activities and leading to the arrest of “up to 80 percent of Abu Mus`ab’s group.”³² Zarqawi managed to make his way to Iraq, and, writing in 2005, Saif stated that he had “not met Abu Mus`ab since he left Iran,” one of several indications that Saif remained in that country.

It is unclear whether Saif remains in Iran to this day, and if he is there, what his level of freedom of movement might be. In early 2003, Iran publicly admitted that it had numerous al-Qa'ida members, including members of the leadership, in custody, but it would not publicly name any of these people.³³ In May of 2003, when directly asked in an ABC News interview whether Iran was holding Saif, Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations Javad Zarif would neither confirm nor deny it, saying that Iran held more al-Qa'ida personnel in captivity than any other country and that because these people generally had multiple passports Iran was unable at the time to positively identify them.³⁴ In early February 2007, however, a number of U.S. government officials, speaking on the condition that they not be identified, told a reporter at the Washington Post that American intelligence did know the precise identities of those held in Iranian custody, and that Iran had provided U.S. intelligence with their names, photographs and fingerprints before 2003.³⁵ In early 2005 the German journalist Bruno Schirra claimed to have been shown by a Western intelligence service a list of the al-Qa'ida operatives held in Iran; the list included Saif.³⁶ According to a “former senior U.S. counterterrorism official,” Saudi intelligence detected communication in early 2003 between al-Qa'ida leaders in Iran and an al-Qa'ida cell in Saudi Arabia and, after demanding that Iran do something about this, Iranian authorities went on to detain 20 to 25 al-Qa'ida officials under house arrest.³⁷ It is said that they were detained at two locations, both guarded by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards: one in villas in the Namak Abrud region on the Caspian coast and the other in Lazivan, a region northwest of Tehran that houses a large military complex.³⁸ In February of 2007 a woman claiming to be the sister-in-law of Abu'l-Walid stated that her sister—Abu'l-Walid's wife—had recently telephoned her from Tehran and told her that

³¹ The details of this account, as given by Saif in his Zarqawi memoir, are corroborated in `Abd al-Rahim `Ali, “al-Muqatilun al-`Arab fi'l-`Iraq,” though in that article Saif is referred to as Colonel Makkawi.

³² Saif al-Adel, Zarqawi memoir.

³³ La Guardia, “Iran holding ‘big time’ members of al-Qa`eda”; “Iran: We’ve got Qaeda Bigs.” In his letter to Zarqawi dated 9 July 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri rhetorically asks: “do the brothers forget that we have more than one hundred prisoners - many of whom are from the leadership who are wanted in their countries - in the custody of the Iranians?”

³⁴ “Ma bish az har keshvar-i digar al-qa`ida ra asyar kardim.” This is a Persian translation of the ABC interview, an English transcript of which does not appear to be available online.

³⁵ Linzer, “Al-Qaeda Suspects.”

³⁶ Schirra, “Wie gefährlich ist Iran?”

³⁷ Windrem, “Al-Qaida reportedly finds safe haven in Iran.”

³⁸ Ibid.

Abu'l-Walid's family, Saif and others were under house arrest there, in the custody of the Revolutionary Guards.³⁹

Whatever his whereabouts, Saif did not cease his al-Qa'ida activities during this period. It is believed that in April of 2002 Sa'd bin Laden, who was part of the al-Qa'ida contingent in Iran led by Saif at the time, organized from inside Iran the truck bombing of a synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia.⁴⁰ In June of 2002, Saif apparently wrote a letter to "brother Mukhtar" under the name 'Abd al-Halim 'Adl, in which he bemoans the losses that al-Qa'ida had incurred since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, expresses strong disapproval of Osama bin Laden and his leadership, and mentions a private letter which he'd tried to send to Abu'l-Walid but which was instead posted on a jihadi web forum.⁴¹ The contents of the letter make clear that Saif was still very much involved in the day-to-day operational affairs of the organization at that time. In 2003, according to Saudi and U.S. intelligence, Saif was in communication with the al-Qa'ida cell in Riyadh that carried out the bombings of the Dorrat al-Jadawel compound in Riyadh on May 12 of that year.⁴² During the same spring Saif was in touch with the Arabic-language newspaper al-Sharq al-Awsat, telling them that he believed that around 350 "Afghan Arabs" had been killed in Afghanistan since the U.S. invasion, and that around 180 of them had been captured.⁴³ December of 2003 saw the inception of "Mu'askar al-Battar," a jihadi magazine published under the auspices of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula; in every issue Saif contributed an article in the section "al-Amn wa'l-istikhbarat" ("Security and Intelligence Operations").⁴⁴ In 2004 a diary of Saif's was recovered during a raid in Saudi Arabia.⁴⁵ He was last heard from in 2005, when he contributed the already-cited memoir on Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi upon the solicitation of the journalist Fu'ad Husayn.

³⁹ al-Shafi'i, "Shaqiqa zawja."

⁴⁰ Windrem, "Al-Qaida reportedly finds safe haven in Iran."

⁴¹ "Al-Adl Letter," http://www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/Al%20Adl%20Letter_Translation.pdf. Apparently Saif's children were with Abu'l-Walid at that time, since he asked in the letter that Abu'l-Walid pass along his affectionate greetings to them. The letter was posted to alneda.com, though I have as of yet not been able to locate it on the Internet Archive (www.archive.org).

⁴² Sherwell, "Teheran 'providing refuge'"; according to un-named U.S. intelligence officials cited in Linzer, "Al-Qaeda Suspects," "there are suspicions, but no proof" that such communication took place.

⁴³ "Al-mas'ul al-'askari li'l-qa'ida."

⁴⁴ Available at various internet sites; what looks like a complete run of the journal can be found here: <http://www.qa3edoon.com/BattarFullWEB/contents.htm>. Some analysis of Saif's writings in "Mu'askar al-Battar" can be found in Ulph, "Al-Qaeda's Online Publications" and Scheuer, "Assessing London and Sharm al-Sheikh."

⁴⁵ "Verbatim Transcript," p. 4.

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