

Search Oxford Islamic Studies



QUR'AN VERSE LOOKUP



DATE CONVERTER

SUBSCRIBER SERVICES | CONTACT US | HELP

ADVANCED SEARCH

BROWSE

QUR'ANIC STUDIES

TIMELINES

▼ LEARNING

Thematic Guides

Teaching Islam

Internet Resources

Geography of the Islamic World

What Everyone Needs to Know
About Islam

Glossary

Focus On

Lesson Plans

Interviews

The Arab Spring

Reference Works

Further Reading

RESOURCES

An Interview with Muhammad Omar Abd al-Rahman

Muhammad Omar Abd al-Rahman is the eldest son of Shaykh Omar Abd al-Rahman, the blind shaykh who led the Egyptian former militant Group [al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya](#) (the Islamic Group) before his arrest in 1993 in the United States. Muhammad spent most of his life outside of [Egypt](#) and shared the journey of many figures of contemporary Islamic militancy. He joined the Afghan [jihad](#) in 1988 before moving to [Sudan](#) in 1992 and returning to [Afghanistan](#) in 1996. Until 2001, he lived in Afghanistan with members of the Islamic Group and al-Qaeda. In 2001, he survived the U.S. invasion before his arrest in [Pakistan](#) in 2003. Eventually, Muhammad was subjected to the American rendition program and sent to jail in Egypt. He was finally released in 2010, a few months before the Egyptian revolution. He discusses his background here with Jérôme Drevon, PhD Candidate at Durham University.

Jérôme Drevon: Thank you Muhammad for accepting to answer a few questions. Can you introduce yourself and the beginning of your involvement in the Islamic movement?

Muhammad Omar Abd al-Rahman: I am Muhammad Omar Abd al-Rahman, the eldest son of Shaykh Omar Abd al-Rahman, who has been jailed in the United States on forged conspiracy charges. As for my involvement in the Islamic movement, I was born in it. When *Amn al-Dawla* [State Security, Egypt's political police] interrogated me after my rendition to Egypt, they said that they usually ask how people became practising and join Islamist groups. But they said that in my case I have been in it since before I was born when I was in my mother's womb! I was indeed raised in this environment and was very young when the events of 1981 occurred [the assassination of former president Anwar Sadat by the Islamic and Jihad Groups]. Back then, I was only 8 years old.

Jérôme Drevon: It has been reported that you travelled to Afghanistan in 1988. What motivated this decision?

Muhammad Omar Abd al-Rahman: The Afghan jihad was a legitimate cause back then. I travelled to Afghanistan when I was 16 years old with my brother Ahmad who was 15. Initially my father visited Afghanistan several times between 1987 and 1989 for short periods of one to two months at a time. He travelled to the training camps and to the fronts. He delivered lectures and incited to jihad. Shaykh Omar did not want the [Arabs](#) to merely benefit from the Afghan setting without contributing. Then he sent us as well. The last time he went there was in 1990. It was also the last time I saw him.

Jérôme Drevon: In Afghanistan, you met many Arab fighters and military commanders, including Shaykh Abdullah Azzam, Muhammad Atef, Abu Obaydah al-Banshiri, and Osama bin Laden. Can you tell us more about the Arabs and their relations to Afghan factions at that time?

Muhammad Omar Abd al-Rahman: This is a tricky issue. When I went to Afghanistan, many groups from diverse countries were there. They all had their own agendas. Some wanted to learn, train and use Afghanistan for their own national cause, in Egypt and Libya for instance. Others wanted to participate in the war effort and help the Afghans win the war. Some groups were doing both. Our group, the Islamic Group, contributed to the jihad and lost many fighters. My father Shaykh Omar was also very close to Shaykh Abdullah Azzam. Both of them were al-Azhar scholars and had a lot in common. As for the Egyptian Jihad Group, they mostly trained their members for jihad in Egypt. They were very secretive and only a few of them participated in

the Afghan jihad. In general, we coordinated with other factions for daily issues and for 'Eid prayers [the prayers which follow the end of Ramadan, ed.] for instance. The general coordination was maintained by Shaykh Abdullah Azzam and Shaykh Osama [bin Laden]. Each Arab militant group had its own objectives and even Shaykh Osama could not unite the diverse armed groups.

Jérôme Drevon: Can you tell us about the origins of the [al-Qaeda](#) organization?

Muhammad Omar Abd al-Rahman: Abu Obayda and Muhammad Atef were the real founders of al-Qaeda [both were Egyptians from the Jihad Group]. Abu Obayda proposed the idea to Shaykh Osama who then accepted it. Abu Obayda and Muhammad Atef were from the Jihad Group and most leaders of al-Qaeda have emerged from this group. At the end of the day, we can say that the Jihad Group became al-Qaeda. So initially the idea of al-Qaeda was proposed to the Islamic Group by Abu Obayda al-Banshiri and Muhammad Atef in 1987. They asked Muhammad Shawqi al-Islambuli [a leading member of the Islamic Group and the brother of Khalid al-Islambuli, who killed former Egyptian president Anwar Sadat] to join them, though he refused. He said that the Islamic Group had more members, a well-established history and had its own goals and objectives. He said to them that you can join us, but we won't be joining you. Later on, there were mutual connections between the Jihad Group and al-Qaeda in terms of administration. For instance al-Qaeda military leader [Abu Obayda] was from the Jihad Group. Eventually Shaykh Osama asked them to make a choice in Sudan and to decide to join al-Qaeda or the Jihad Group. Dr. Ayman [al-Zawahiri] then split and maintained the leadership of the Jihad Group. The unification of the two happened later when Ayman joined Shaykh Osama and al-Qaeda became Qaeda al-Jihad.

Jérôme Drevon: What happened after the end of the war in 1992?

Muhammad Omar Abd al-Rahman: The war in Afghanistan ended in 1992. It was quickly followed by a civil war between Afghan factions, notably Sayyaf, Rabbani and Hekmatyar vying for power. Most Arabs, including Tal'at Fuad Qassem from our group [he was a leader of the Islamic Group who was renditioned in the 1990s by the CIA to Egypt before his execution in Cairo, ed.] did not want to be involved. Only one small faction joined Hekmatyar. We sat in Peshawar with other Islamic groups to find an alternative. It was impossible for us to go back to our countries. They had turned against us and we were now considered terrorists after initially being praised as mujahideen. Pakistan was also pressured by the US and arrested many Arab fighters. So we had to disappear and find an alternative. Personally I had no passport so I obtained a forged Iraqi passport. We were faced with three possibilities. The first was to go to Sudan where al-Bashir [Omar, president of Sudan] had already welcomed many Islamist movements. The second was Yemen with its convenient tribal system. The last option was to go to Europe and claim political asylum. Personally I went to Sudan. Back then, we really had no other choice. We couldn't go back to Egypt and face imprisonment.

Jérôme Drevon: After living a few years in Sudan, you returned to Afghanistan in 1996. Can you describe your relations with al-Qaeda and the Taliban after that?

Muhammad Omar Abd al-Rahman: We went back to Afghanistan in the same plane as al-Qaeda and we had brotherly relations with them. When we arrived, Muhammad Atef wanted us to be together because we did not really know the place. Our relations were therefore at a personal level and not at an organizational level. We dealt together with administrative issues and we assisted each other. We liked one another. The Islamic Group did not, however, participate in the war against Masud and Sayyaf. With regards to the Taliban, we did not know them initially when we arrived in Afghanistan. But eventually we saw them as responsible individuals and visited them regularly.

Jérôme Drevon: You were in Afghanistan in 2001 when al-Qaeda attacked the United States. It was reported that leading members of al-Qaeda did not agree with these operations. Can you describe the debates on 9/11 in Afghanistan?

Muhammad Omar Abd al-Rahman: Our position was to support the government in Afghanistan and to assist the Afghans. We thought it was more important to help an Islamic state than to fight the [United States](#). Why would we weaken this Islamic government by launching wars elsewhere? At the beginning, when Shaykh Osama announced his war against the US in 1998, the Taliban did not accept it. Mullah Omar opposed his attacks on Dar al Salam and Nairobi and forbade him to speak to the media.

Shaykh Osama nevertheless thought it was his religious duty and argued that the US would attack them anyway. Before 9/11, we heard that an operation was in preparation but were not aware of the details. The Taliban sent a delegation to Shaykh Osama to tell him to abstain. Similarly, Shaykh al-Islambuli [Muhammad al-Islambuli] and others from al-Qaeda tried to convince Shaykh Osama not to act. Shaykh Osama was angry and told them to cease raising the issue. When the operation happened, people were truly saddened. Shaykh al-Islambuli said that Shaykh Osama injured the lion without killing him. Islambuli asked: "What would happen next? You angered the lion and the lion will retaliate." We are rational. We knew there were no plans and no preparations to resist a US invasion. They did not have a contingency plan. What would the US do and what would happen to us? What would happen to our children and women?

When the US attacked one month after the 9/11 attacks, nobody was prepared. The Taliban had an internal enemy that could not be beaten. They could not be beat Masud and now we were at war against a more powerful foreign enemy. So we had to send our women and families to Iran, where Mustafa Hamza [a leader of the Islamic Group] was living. It was very difficult. These people were civilians, not fighters. Eventually Iran closed the border. The escape was disorganised and many were martyred, including women and children. We were totally unprepared.

Jérôme Drevon: So where did you go ?

Muhammad Omar Abd al-Rahman: Our choices were based on our geographic location. The Islamic Group in Kabul was alone and joined Sayyaf. Shaykh Osama went to Tora Bora. I was personally in Kandahar with Mullah Omar and Muhammad Atef. I was with Muhammad Atef when he was killed by a plane and I was the only one to survive. We could not resist the bombings and fight. So we left for Pakistan and thought we would return when the situation changed.

In 2003, I was arrested by the Pakistani and American forces. They took me to the American military base in Bagram next to Kabul. They interrogated me for six months and then I was sent to Egypt in total secrecy. In Egypt, I was jailed for three months in the first prison and then spent another two years in a prison controlled by the political police. During that period nobody knew I was there, not even my family. Then the state recognised I was in prison and I remained there for another four years. I was released three months before the 2011 revolution.

Jérôme Drevon: Can you tell us about your brother Ahmad? What happened to him ?

Muhammad Omar Abd al-Rahman: Ahmad stayed for three years with Sayyaf. Then he had the opportunity to leave and he subsequently went to Waziristan. He opened schools and helped the brothers and sisters from the Islamic Group to come back to Egypt. He did not want to come back. Eventually he was killed by an American drone in November 2011.

Jérôme Drevon: Why? Was he fighting?

Muhammad Omar Abd al-Rahman: Ahmad was always by himself. He was a free spirit. He was fighting in Pakistan with the Taliban, not with al-Qaeda. You must remember, the original people of jihad are the Afghan people, not the Arabs. The Arabs were the salt, but the Afghans were the meat. They were the majority. We were just a few thousand in comparison. Ahmad did not coordinate with al-Qaeda and refused their administrative system. Others were closer to al-Qaeda than he was. He was independent of even the Islamic Group. He was the word of truth. He stayed in Pakistan to fight an illegal foreign occupation.

Jérôme Drevon: What did he think about 9/11?

Muhammad Omar Abd al-Rahman: He opposed it like most of us did. We all opposed it apart from a few individuals. Even the majority of al-Qaeda opposed it.

[Visit Interviews main page](#)



© 2014. All Rights Reserved. Privacy policy and legal notice