



February 25, 2014

Sheikh Sami al-Uraydi: Portrait of a Jordanian cleric who serves as a senior religious authority for the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch.



Sami al-Uraydi preaching in praise of jihad before Al-Nusra Front operatives
(<http://www.dailymotion.com>)

Overview

1. **Sheikh Dr. Sami al-Uraydi**, aka **Abu Mahmud al-Shami**, is a Jordanian cleric and a **senior religious authority of the Al-Nusra Front**, Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria. In an interview broadcast on Al-Jazeera TV on December 19, 2013, Al-Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani advised people to heed the words of Al-Uraydi, since he represents the organization's position on religious and ideological questions.¹
2. In a lengthy interview of an ideological nature, (October 21, 2013), Al-Uraydi defined the goals of the Al-Nusra Front: **overthrowing the Assad regime, enforcing Islamic law (Sharia) and establishing an Islamic state. However, in the interview, Al-Uraydi attempts to display a pragmatic façade**, similar to a subsequent interview

¹ See our Information Bulletin from January 5, 2013: "[Abu Muhammad al-Julani, head of the Al-Nusra Front, the branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria, gave a rare interview in which he tried to show pragmatism without abandoning the organization's extreme jihadist nature and objectives.](#)"

given by Abu Muhammad al-Julani (to Jazeera on December 10, 2013). He refrains from noting the connection between the Al-Nusra Front and Al-Qaeda and its leader, Al-Zawahiri; he emphasizes the Al-Nusra Front's cooperation with other rebel groups; he calls to assist the residents of Syria and denies allegations that his organization has accused the Syrian people of heresy (*takfir*).

Abu Muhammad al-Julani's interview with Jazeera

3. **On December 10, 2013, Abu Muhammad al-Julani**, the leader the Al-Nusra Front (Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria), granted an interview to Al-Jazeera TV which was broadcast on December 19, 2013. In the interview, Abu Muhammad al-Julani notes, among other things, that it is advisable to heed the words of Sami al-Uraydi, who represents Al-Qaeda's perception on the subject of "*takfir*" **[Note: "*takfir*" is the declaration of a Muslim or group of Muslims as infidels, because they do not adopt the radical meaning of Islam. This is a serious accusation, because it means that the blood of those who have been labeled as infidels may be spilled].**² In the interview, Al-Julani adds **that there are other senior clerics** who are acceptable to the Al-Nusra Front, but for security reasons he does not wish to mention their names.

4. It should be noted that the Al-Nusra Front maintains a **hierarchical religious establishment**, which supervises the religious conduct of its military commanders. The organization's religious system is headed by **the grand mufti** (*Al-Qadi al-'Aam*), while serving in the various districts are **religious supervisors**, who oversee the commanders' religious conduct and inculcate them with the organization's salafist-jihadi ideology. In addition, the Al-Nusra Front maintains "**Sharia authorities**" (*Hay'at Shar'iyya*), which operate police forces and Sharia courts, and provide aid to the local population.

Personal details about Sheikh Sami al-Uraydi

5. **Sheikh Dr. Sami al-Uraydi**, aka **Abu Mahmud al-Shami**, born in Amman in 1973, is a senior Jordanian cleric in Syria who serves as an Al-Nusra Front's senior religious authority. He earned an undergraduate degree in Sharia studies (Islamic religious law) at the University of Jordan. In 1994, he began his graduate studies in Islamic Tradition (*Hadith*) at the same university, graduating in 1997. In 2001, he earned his doctorate in

² About the *takfiri* worldview of the Al-Nusra Front, see our study from September 23, 2013: ["The Al-Nusra Front \(Jabhat al-Nusra\) is an Al-Qaeda Salafist-jihadi network, prominent in the rebel organizations in Syria. It seeks to overthrow the Assad regime and establish an Islamic Caliphate in Greater Syria, a center for regional and international terrorism and subversion."](#) Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah calls the organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda "*takfiri* groups." He often flaunts the "*takfiri* terrorism threat" which, according to him, threatens the entire region.

Hadith, from the Islamic University in Baghdad. His works include a doctoral thesis about Imam al-Nasa'i³ and a book on Sheikh Ibn Taymiyyah, a role model for Salafist Muslims⁴ (dailymotion.com).

6. **Sami al-Uraydi is an integral part of the hierarchical religious establishment maintained by the Al-Nusra Front.** He regularly preaches in praise of jihad to the organization's operatives fighting in Syria. Two clips documenting him were uploaded onto the Internet by **Al-Manara al-Baydaa**, the media arm of the Al-Nusra Front. These clips provide personal details about him, but they are devoted primarily to presenting the Al-Nusra Front's ideology and policy. He also disseminates his views through **his Twitter account**, which deals extensively with the topic of jihad. For example, a tweet from February 17, 2014 stated: "The jihad fighter harms the jihad fighters with his vices [...] because of his vices, he [the jihad fighter] causes aversion to him among Muslims."



Sami al-Uraydi's Twitter page (twitter.com)

Issues of the Al-Nusra Front's ideology and policy according to Sheikh Sami al-Uraydi's interview

7. **On October 21, 2013, Al-Manara al-Baydaa**, the media arm of the Al-Nusra Front, broadcast a long Interview with **Sheikh Sami al-Uraydi**. Following are a number of

³ **Ahmad bin Shu'ayb al-Nasa'i** – a leading Sunnah cleric. He lived from 829 to 915 AD. He compiled one of the canonical Hadith collections of Sunni Islam.

⁴ **Taqi al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah** – Islamic theologian and Sunni commentator of Syrian descent, who lived from 1263 to 1328. Follower of the Hanbali school of thought. He is a role model and a source of authority for Salafists, especially Salafist-jihadis.

issues that were raised in the interview (through questions which, in our assessment, were coordinated in advance):

- a. **The nature of the Al-Nusra Front** – Sheikh al-Uraydi presented the Al-Nusra Front as a Sunni Salafist organization, established in order to help the Sunni community and the Islamic nation as a whole. According to him, the organization’s sources of authority are the words of the Quran and the Sunna⁵, according to the interpretation of the early generations of Islam (Al-Sahaba, the friends of the Prophet Muhammad,⁶ the subsequent generation and the generation after that). With regard to the organization’s modern sources of authority, al-Uraydi mentioned **Abdallah Azzam**,⁷ **Hamoud bin Uqalaa al-Shu’aybi**⁸ and **Sheikh Umar Abd al-Rahman**,⁹ among others. In the context of God’s sovereignty, Al-Uraydi referred his listeners to the books of **Sayyid Qutb**¹⁰ and **Muhammad Qutb**.¹¹
- b. **The role of Al-Qaeda and al-Zawahiri** – Sheikh al-Uraydi refrained from mentioning Al-Qaeda and its leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, for good reason. In our assessment, this is part of Al-Nusra Front’s attempt to present a pragmatic façade by **downplaying the connection between it and Al-Qaeda**. This propagandist tactic, which is designed, inter alia, to win the favor of the Syrian public and facilitate collaboration with Islamic rebel organizations, was also reflected in an interview given by Al-Julani to Al-Jazeera TV, in which he defined the connection between his organization and Al-Qaeda as only an “ideological connection”.
- c. **The use of weapons to impose Islam** – to the interviewer’s question “Why are you armed?” Al-Uraydi replied that this is an instruction from Allah and is in line with the words of the Prophet Muhammad. He quoted verses from

⁵ **The Sunnah**: Literally, lifestyle, practice. This is the oral tradition of Islam, which is based on the way of the Prophet Muhammad, as it is learned from stories attributed to him and to his associates and from rulings that he made, which have been preserved in Muslim tradition.

⁶ **Al-Sahaba** – the friends of the Prophet Muhammad, who accompanied him in the dissemination of Islam. These are the first Muslims who joined the Prophet Muhammad.

⁷ **Abdallah Azzam** – a Palestinian from Silat al-Harithiya in Samaria, who fought in Afghanistan against the Russians. He was Osama bin Laden’s ideological mentor. He developed the principle of jihad as a personal duty of every Muslim. He was killed in 1989.

⁸ **Hamoud bin Uqalaa al-Shu’aybi** – a radical Saudi sheikh affiliated with Al-Qaeda.

⁹ **Sheikh Umar Abd al-Rahman** – a blind radical Islamic sheikh of Egyptian descent. He is incarcerated in the United States for his involvement in the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993.

¹⁰ **Sayyid Qutb** – one of the most important radical Islamic philosophers in modern times. He is an Egyptian who developed the contemporary radical Islamic ideology. According to this ideology, Muslims must first fight all the infidels (secular individuals) within Muslim society and impose Sharia even before doing battle with non-Muslim infidels. He was executed by the Egyptian regime in 1966. His philosophy deeply affected Ayman al-Zawahiri, who frequently refers to him in his writings.

¹¹ **Muhammad Qutb** – Sayyid Qutb’s brother. He disseminated his brother’s philosophy in Saudi Arabia. He held a doctorate in Islamic Law and is an important Islamic figure in his own right.

the Quran justifying the fighting and the use of weapons and specified the cases in which the Quran, in his opinion, requires fighting: It is imperative to fight on behalf of Allah and on behalf of the weak, it is imperative to fight in order to prevent civil war, **and it is imperative to fight in order to help impose Islam**. He added (quoting Abu Taymiyyah) that the Al-Nusra Front's operatives bear arms in order to glorify the words of Allah, impose Islamic law (*Sharia*) and "repel the enemy who is aggressive toward religion, land and honor."

- d. **The issue of *takfir*** – Al-Uraydi was asked about this sensitive issue raised by the Al-Nusra Front's enemies: "Are you accusing the Syrian people of heresy?" He replied (apologetically) that the Al-Nusra Front does not distinguish between Muslims **and does not accuse any Muslim of heresy**, "as long as there is no decisive evidence of this." In response to the interviewer's question, "What will you do after the Assad regime is overthrown?" he replied: "We love the Syrian people [...] The residents of Syria welcomed us and provided us with assistance. And with Allah's help we will work together, **after we topple the present criminal regime and after we enforce the Sharia of Allah, and we will establish an Islamic state with Allah's help [...].**"
- e. **Cooperation with other rebel groups** – in response to the interviewer's question, "What do you think of the various factions fighting in Syria?" Al-Uraydi replied: "The factions fighting in Syria are many and varied. Nevertheless, **they agree on one goal, and that is the removal of the present criminal regime. Apart from that, they are divided. Most of them are interested in imposing Sharia and establishing an Islamic state with Allah's help, after the regime is overthrown. They are our brothers, they are our flesh and blood and we are theirs.** Even if we have different names, and even if we have our differences on some minor issues, they are still our brothers, our flesh and blood. **We work together in joint military operations rooms, and we manage the Islamic religious authorities (*Al-Hay'at al-Shar'iyya*) together.** We and they conduct [common] activities for purposes of social assistance and propaganda in Syria. **The rest of the fighting factions, who are interested in establishing a civil and secular state, are actually a minority.** We tell them to come to their senses and learn a lesson from what happened in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya."

- f. **An appeal to Muslims around the world to provide aid to the residents of Syria** – at the end of the interview, Al-Uraydi called for unity among Muslims. He called on Muslims around the world **to rush to the aid of the residents of Syria through combat, money or words** [i.e., prayers and advocacy].



Sami al-Uraydi during the interview, which was published on October 21, 2013, standing beside the flag of the Al-Nusra Front (YouTube.com).