

# MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

## Personalities Behind the Insurgency

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### COUSIN OF SYRIAN PRESIDENT WARNS WINDOW FOR REFORM IS CLOSING AS REGIME LOSES GRIP

Ribal al-Assad, the cousin of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, calls for significant change in Syria from his self-imposed exile in the United Kingdom. Al-Assad is the director of a group calling itself the Organization for Democracy and Freedom in Syria, whose platform calls for ending Syria's Emergency Law which has been in effect since the early 1960s and the peaceful transformation of the Syrian state through reform, creating a government of national unity and perhaps reconciliation. Ribal, 36, is an Alawite, Syria's obscurantist Islamic sect often considered to be an offshoot of Shi'ism. He is the son of Rifaat al-Assad, the brother of the late Syrian strongman Hafez al-Assad, and "butcher of Hama" – the 1982 massacre in the northern Syria city of Hama directed against the Muslim Brotherhood which killed an estimated 20,000. In early February, just days away from the fall of Hosni Mubarak, Ribal spoke to a prominent Saudi news site strongly recommending ending Syria's state of emergency that has existed since 1963, which the regime has just announced will happen (Day Press [Damascus], March 27), and that Bashar al-Assad would be prudent to enact real reform to before a violent upheaval could begin, a prospect for which it is now too late (Elaph.com, February 5).



General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar

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In a recent editorial in a Lebanese English-language daily, Ribal stated that the protests in his native Syria were driven primarily by economic causes rather than political ones but that conditions related to massive economic stagnation, rising food prices, and overall improvements in quality of life would eventually merge with desires of political openness to evolve into an uprising against the regime of his cousin, Bashar al-Assad (Daily Star [Beirut], March 3). Ribal holds that the Ba'ath Party's inherent intransigence may likely be its downfall and though it has ruled Syria since 1963, it has shown difficulty in adapting to serious changes in both regional and internal dynamics. "You have to move very quickly. This is a very small window of opportunity... Otherwise things will happen like in neighboring countries," according to Ribal (Gulf News, March 23).

Weeks before the Ba'ath regime's violent reaction to protests in the southern city of Dera'a, Ribal posted an interview with Portugal's Lusa news agency on his organization's website outlining his manifesto for change in Syria. He wishes to avoid a "revolution" that would create space for heavy-handed tactics by Ba'athist apparatchiks that would inevitably take the lives of Syrian civilians. According to Ribal: "Nobody wants a popular uprising in Syria; the last thing that people want is a revolution in Syria, as this would lead to disaster and chaos, that nobody wishes" ([www.odf-syria.org](http://www.odf-syria.org), February 5). By the end of February, activists began to stir in Syria as waves of popular revolt spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa. By mid-March, Ribal's optimism was undermined by an anxious regime's desire to assert its authority. Ribal's wish for an orderly transition out of Syria's Ba'athist isolationism may very soon be relegated to wishful thinking as security forces have begun to kill protestors. In response to the purported killing of civilians in Dera'a, President Bashar al-Assad issued a one-line press release via SANA, the state news agency, that the governor of Dera'a, Faisal Ahmad Kolthoum, had been summarily "dismissed." In a separate statement, Bashar indicated that he was immediately increasing the salaries of both civilian state employees and the military while concomitantly reducing their tax burden to the state (Syrian Arab News Agency, March 24). In a March interview with Voice of America, Ribal al-Assad emphasized that he felt an uncoordinated revolt in Syria would be disastrous in part because of the country's ethnic and religious diversity which includes its majority Sunni Arabs, his minority Alawites, Druze, Circassians, various ancient Christian sects and, most notably, Syrian

Kurds, who have a recent history of restiveness in the country's northeast. Ribal warned his cousin, "Change or you will be changed" (VOA, March 21).

#### SHIA OPPOSITION LEADER RETURNS TO BAHRAIN AMID UPRISING, ONLY TO BE DETAINED AGAIN

Hassan Mushaima, the formerly exiled Shia Bahraini opposition leader, returned to Bahrain only to be detained in the wake of the Persian Gulf statelet's deadly protests which began on February 14. Mushaima, who leads the Haq Movement for Liberty and Democracy, was allowed to return to the Kingdom after he was assured charges against him would be dropped. Bahrain's King Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa initially sought to calm the political temperature on the Sunni-minority ruled island by allowing Mushaima to reenter Manama under the guise of peaceful dialogue aimed at quelling protests there. The Bahraini uprising began on February 4 with a demonstration in front of the Egyptian Embassy in Manama espousing solidarity with democracy activists in Cairo's Tahrir Square.

Bahrain is typically viewed as a battleground between the Gulf heavyweights of Shia Iran and Wahabbi Saudi Arabia. Until the entry of Saudi troops, at the invitation of King Hamad, into the crisis, this proxy struggle in vulnerable Bahrain had been comprised of words rather than deeds. Following the detention of Hassan Mushaima, the Najaf, Iraq-based Iranian cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, one of the Shia world's most prominent thinkers on jurisprudence, weighed in on the matter, stating through a spokesman that the Bahraini crisis must be resolved "through peaceful means" (Mehr News Agency, March 17). Sistani's statement is a passive way of letting his followers in Bahrain know that the entry of Saudi ground troops there was unacceptable.

Bahraini security forces rearrested Hassan Mushaima along with Ibrahim Sharif al-Sayed, the Sunni leftist leader of the National Democratic Action Society - Wa'ad, on March 16, just after a 90-day emergency law, called State of National Safety, was imposed in the country (Bahrain News Agency, March 21). The Bahraini government subsequently described the two as conspirators in a "sedition ring" after a call for their release was made by Sheikh Ali Salman, chief of the mainstream, Shia-led al-Wefaq party (The National [Abu Dhabi], March 21). The Bahrain uprising endorsed by Mushaima has roiled the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, particularly Saudi Arabia and

Kuwait with sizeable Shia minorities whose exposure to Iranian influence terrifies their respective monarchies.

In response to the intense agitation fostered by Mushaima and other protest leaders, GCC members have deployed troops in Joint Peninsula Shield Force (JPSF) at the request of Bahrain's embattled government. The actions of forward deployed troops in the JPSF have led Ali Akbar Saleh, Iran's Foreign Minister, to boldly state, "Iran will not stand by idly in the event of any Saudi intervention to eradicate the Shiites of Bahrain" (Asharq al-Awsat, March 15). The Kuwaiti Navy is now in Bahrain's territorial waters as a contingent of the JPSF in an effort to restore "stability" (Bahrain News Agency, March 21).

The United Arab Emirates, which Western powers have been trying to enlist in their war against Colonel Mu'ammār al-Qaddafi's troops in Libya, has sent 500 police officers to Manama. According to Iranian state media, Bahrain's opposition leaders have called this move by the UAE a possible "occupation" (PressTV, March, 14). Arab columnists are highly skeptical of Mushaima's motives and accuse him of being a lever of Iranian power in tiny Bahrain. Many believe he seeks objectives well beyond the Pearl Square roundabout protestor's original calls for transforming the Kingdom into a constitutional monarchy and now intends to overthrow the monarchy entirely (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, March 21). Hassan Mushaima announced the formation of a coalition movement calling itself "Coalition for a Bahraini Republic," composed of his Haq Movement, the London-based Bahrain Freedom Movement, and the al-Wafa Islamic Society (Xinhua, March 10).

"We hereby declare a tripartite coalition between al-Wafa, al-Haq and [the] Bahrain Freedom Movement that have chosen to fight for a complete downfall of the regime, and the establishment of a democratic republic in Bahrain," Mushaima stated (PressTV, March 9). Now that Mushaima and other Bahraini leaders are currently detained and allegedly brutal security crackdowns are taking place throughout the country, Bahrain's protest movement, while certainly not crushed, is in retreat, and the Kingdom of Hamad ibn Isa al-Khalifa is showing few signs of morphing into Hassan Mushaima's wished-for republic. King Hamad's Gulf Air has suspended travel to Iraq and Iran as well as Lebanon in an attempt to punish those states economically for their political figures' rhetorical support for Hassan Mushaima and other like-minded Shia opposition leaders (Reuters, March 23).

## **A Biographical Sketch of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's Murad Ebrahim**

*By Zachary Abuza*

**T**he Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is the Philippines largest Islamic secessionist and insurgent movement and is led by a man named el-Haj Murad Ebrahim. For the last eight years Ebrahim has been at the forefront of negotiating with the Philippine government for greater autonomy for the Moros, the Philippines' rebellious Muslim minority. Ebrahim was elected chairman of the MILF in mid-2003 following the death of the group's founder, Salamat Hashim. His commitment to a negotiated settlement has gradually undermined Ebrahim's support in the estimated 11,000-12,000-man strong secessionist group in the southern Philippines, located primarily on the massive island of Mindanao.

In 1976, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos signed an autonomy agreement with Nur Misuari, the founder of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a secessionist organization that was trying to establish an independent homeland for the Muslim minority in the southern Philippine region consisting of Mindanao, the Sulu archipelago, Basilan, and Palawan. The Philippine government never implemented the agreement and hostilities resumed between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and MNLF. The failed peace process led to a leadership contest within the MNLF. Salamat Hashim, the group's number two, left the organization and founded the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Hashim moved his headquarters from Tripoli, Libya – where he had been sheltered by Colonel Mu'ammār al-Qaddafi – to Lahore, Pakistan in 1978, where he remained for the next decade, and successfully brought with him a cadre of MNLF field commanders. One of those commanders was el-Haj Murad Ebrahim.

Murad Ebrahim is from Maguindanao Province, in central Mindanao. He was born on May 2, 1948, and orphaned when he was 13. Ebrahim attended his father's madrassa and set out to study engineering at Notre Dame University in Cotabato City before joining the MNLF. He was one of the first MNLF combatants to receive training in Malaysia's Sabah State on the island of Borneo. By the early 1970s Ebrahim was a prominent field commander, and in 1974 became the commander



of the MNLF's Kutawato Revolutionary Committee. In 1984, after Salamat Hashim formally organized the MILF, Ebrahim became its vice chairman for military affairs, alongside Aleem Abdulaziz Mimbintas, the vice chairman for internal affairs, and Ghadzali Jafaar, the vice chairman for political affairs.

As he rose toward the MILF's top echelon, Ebrahim developed camaraderie and popularity as a commander. As a testament to his overall reputation beyond militant circles in Mindanao, a story about Ebrahim continues to circulate of an episode when, in the mid 1980s, he was captured by Philippine forces and then released when villagers besieged the police station in a bid to free him.

Ebrahim was portrayed as less ideological and more pragmatic than the erudite Hashim, who was educated at Cairo's al-Azhar University. MILF officials insisted to Jamestown that while Ebrahim was not a religiously trained leader, – a characteristic relatively unusual for MILF leaders and field commanders – one should not underestimate his religiosity. "Anyone who grew up in a madrassa knows his Quran," one official chided Jamestown.

Although the MILF rejected the 1996 autonomy accord between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the MNLF during the administration of then President Fidel Valdez Ramos, in 1997 the MILF and Manila began formal peace talks. However, the 2000 election of President Joseph Estrada led the government to take an unsympathetic stance toward the Muslim Moro rebels whose insurgency had plagued the southern Philippines for decades. Estrada ordered the AFP to resume military operations, which culminated in the capture of the MILF main base, Camp Abu Bakar, in July 2000 (Manila Bulletin, July 11, 2000).

Following President Estrada's ouster in a people power uprising in 2001, fresh Libyan and Malaysian-backed peace talks were held in Tripoli and Kuala Lumpur in 2001 (ABS-CBN News, August 15, 2008). The then newly elected president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, resumed peace talks with the MILF under the watchful eye of Colonel al-Qaddafi's second son, Seif al-Islam al-Qaddafi, which concluded in a ceasefire that lasted until 2003. [1] Peace talks broke down in 2003 and pervasive fighting erupted, with Philippine military personnel seizing several large MILF camps. Thus, when Ebrahim advocated resuming talks with the government, there

was considerable suspicion within quarters of the MILF by members who were troubled by his possible motives.

Murad Ebrahim convinced the MILF's central committee to drop its demand for independence and to settle for autonomy, cognizant that the MILF could not win an independent homeland on the battlefield. From 2004 to 2007, the MILF and the government were ostensibly negotiating the size and scope of the autonomous region. The MILF demanded an additional 1,478 villages in addition to the five provinces that comprised the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM); the government contended that only 618 were Muslim majority and thus should be included in the MILF's ancestral domain.

In November 2007, a draft autonomy agreement over the MILF's "ancestral domain" was finally concluded, giving the MILF an additional 712 villages (Philippine Inquirer, July 22, 2008). Nonetheless, Christian lawmakers in Mindanao, the AFP, and hard-line members of the cabinet rejected the agreement in December 2007. The country's Supreme Court found it to be unconstitutional in August 2008 (Reuters, August 31, 2008). In the wake of this political deadlock, violent militancy returned. Although President Arroyo pledged to restart talks, formal discussions failed to restart before the end of her term in May 2010. The breakdown of talks led to renewed fighting by the MILF and attacks on Christian villages in 2008-2009, which left an estimated 400 dead and thousands displaced (AFP, February 10).

The government's rejection of the draft accord severely undermined Murad Ebrahim. There was already considerable opposition amongst rank and file over the peace process. While the combatants continued to live in remote camps, much of the group's leadership had taken advantage of the peace process and returned to the cities to focus on business ventures such as a large trucking concern Ebrahim is rumored to own. Hard-line commanders in the MILF continued to question the government's sincerity over the peace process and expressed concern that the protracted peace negotiations had severely degraded the MILF's military capabilities. It was widely rumored in 2006-2007 that uncompromising militants had tried to assassinate Ebrahim. When MILF militants resumed hostilities in 2008-09, Ebrahim was in no position to either rein them in or denounce their actions. In February 2011, as the administration of President Benigno Aquino, Jr. prepared to resume formal negotiations with the MILF, a renegade commander named Ameril Umbra Kato

quit the group and vowed to resume offensive military operations (AFP, February 5; see *Militant Leadership Monitor*, February 2011). As Kato's renegade actions show, on his best day, Ebrahim cannot claim to control the entire organization.

Even if Murad Ebrahim were able to conclude an agreement with the government, the proposed Bangsamoro Juridical Entity would legally have to supersede the 1996 accord between the government and the MNLF. This is unlikely to happen easily. The MNLF are unable to countenance Ebrahim and the MILF's leadership. Ebrahim knew that he had to broaden the MILF's membership to include ethnic Tausugs, who are in both the MNLF and Abu Sayyaf, but he was never able to expand beyond the MILF's core membership of the Maguindanaon and Maranao ethnic groups. As it currently stands, al-Haj Murad Ebrahim's leadership over Moro irredentists is looking increasingly tenuous.

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Note:

1. Antoine Sfeir, *The Columbia World Dictionary of Islamism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, November, 2009), p.332.

## **A Profile of Major General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar: Yemen's Dark Horse**

*By Michael Horton*

On March 21, Yemeni Major General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar announced that he was joining anti-government protesters in their calls for Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down (Mareb Press, March 21). Ali Muhsin's defection to the growing protest movement in his country is the most significant blow to the Saleh regime thus far. Ali Muhsin released a video statement telling protestors: "Yemen today is facing comprehensive crises that threaten Yemen's political and social entity and the Yemenis' future... as a result of the authorities' practices outside of the constitution and laws, the adopting of exclusionary and marginalizing policies, neglecting the national partnership and the absence of justice" (Yemen Times, March 24). Ali Muhsin is commander of Yemen's First Armored Division and is the overall commander of Yemen's Northwest Military District.

Ali Muhsin is one of the most powerful men in Yemen, and easily one of the most important men within the Yemeni Army. For many years, he was considered to be the number two figure in Yemen's power structure and the man most likely to succeed President Saleh. While his political and military power was weakened during six rounds of conflict with the Houthi rebels in northwest Yemen during the years 2004-2010, the general still commands the respect of many Yemenis in the north as well as many within the army (see *Militant Leadership Monitor*, March 2010). Most importantly, he commands roughly thirteen thousand men and a formidable array of tanks including some Russian-built T-72s, Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs), and an assortment of lightly armored vehicles.

Elements of the First Armored Division have already been deployed within the Yemeni capital of Sana'a with some APCs taking defensive positions around encampments of anti-government protesters near Sana'a University – ostensibly to protect the demonstrators from forces loyal to the president (al-Tagheer, March 22). This means that an already dangerous and unstable situation has become far more volatile. Elements of the First Armored Division are facing down troops and hardware from the Republican Guard and the Central Security Service (CSS), commanded by the

president's son and nephew respectively. As a punitive measure, Sana'a is in the process of revoking salaries and privileges of all commanders and officers led by Ali Muhsin in what is termed as a "coup" against the state (Aden Press, March 24).

### A Political and Military Pragmatist

General Ali Muhsin's and President Saleh's backgrounds contain some notable similarities. They both came from Yemen's tribal class, both ascended through the military's hierarchy, and both earned their well-deserved reputations as tough minded, incredibly shrewd manipulators during the 1970s and 1980s. It is often inaccurately reported that Ali Muhsin and Saleh are from the same family. They are, however, from both the same village, Bait al-Ahmar, and the same tribe, the Sanhaan.

When Saleh came to power after the assassination of Lieutenant Colonel Ahmed bin Hussein al-Ghashmi (President of the Yemen Arab Republic 1977-78 and Saleh's close mentor), he relied heavily on the backing of Ali Muhsin, who was already a force within the Yemeni Army. The two men, who have much in common, have always had a contentious relationship. Saleh has long perceived Ali Muhsin as both a threat and an asset to his regime.

Ali Muhsin is by all accounts a highly competent military leader and, most importantly, a master of asymmetric warfare. He, even more so than Saleh, understands the value of irregular forces, their ability to operate across borders, infiltrate the enemy, and their propaganda value. Muhsin had many years to master these techniques and develop the networks that served him and Saleh and, arguably, continue to serve him. Before unification of the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in 1990, the two countries fought an almost continuous low intensity and most often largely covert war against one another. Ali Muhsin was a key figure in these operations. In the late 1980s as what became known as "Afghan Arabs" (Yemenis and other Arabs who had fought against the Soviet Army in Afghanistan) began returning to Yemen, Ali Muhsin recognized the fact that these men, in some cases, had years of experience in guerilla warfare techniques. "Afghan Arabs" were recruited in large numbers by Ali Muhsin to lead operations against the PDRY government. In the 1994 Yemeni civil war, in which the south briefly seceded and formed the short-lived Democratic Republic of Yemen (DRY), these men were key factors in the north's rapid

victory over southern forces.

Ali Muhsin's ties to the fighters extend to a familial level. He is married to the sister of Tariq al-Fadhli, one of Yemen's most famous "Afghan Arabs" and now a prominent figure in south Yemeni politics. A 2008 Chatham House paper labeled Ali Muhsin a convert to Salafism – this is in all likelihood incorrect and is almost certainly a simplistic assessment of a complex man. [1] He, like Tariq al-Fadhli, both of whom are rumored to enjoy a glass of whiskey, is known to be a military pragmatist who makes use of the assets he has access to, regardless of their religious ideologies, when the situation demands their particular skill sets. Both Ali Muhsin and Saleh are widely thought to have employed groups of Salafi militants against the Houthis. The Houthis, as Zaidi 'Fiver' Shia Muslims, are thought of as apostates by Salafis. In the Salafi reading of Islam, such apostasy is punishable by death.

### Major General Ali Muhsin's War?

Many Yemen analysts have suggested that the war in northwest Yemen's Sadah Governorate against the Houthi rebels was started in order to weaken both Ali Muhsin's political and military position as well as to weaken the power of military forces. In the lead up to the first round of fighting in 2004, President Saleh had been an active supporter of *al-Shabaab al-Mumineen* (Believing Youth movement), a Houthi organization, in order to counter the growing Salafi threat in the region. When the revolt broke out into widespread warfare (sporadic fighting had started well before 2004), Ali Muhsin, as commander of the Northwest Military District, was charged with quelling the insurrection. His forces performed poorly against the Houthi rebels in all of the six rounds of conflict between 2004-2010, though his role and level of involvement in the conflict had diminished by the start of round six in 2009 when the president's son, Brigadier Ahmed Ali Saleh, took a more active role in the war.

His performance in the Sadah conflicts weakened Ali Muhsin's position within the regime and the army. He was blamed for not being able to deal with the Houthis – though Ahmed Ali Saleh and his Republican Guard performed no better than Ali Muhsin or his troops – and he was also accused of rampant corruption as well as actually selling arms to the Houthis. The conflicts did materially weaken his forces: the First Armored Division lost countless tanks, APCs, and other materiel throughout the conflict. The years of hard fighting against a rebel force that is a master of both its home

terrain and of guerrilla tactics also took their toll on the Yemeni Army's morale, which has yet to recover.

The wars in Sadah also intensified the rivalry between Ali Muhsin and Ahmed Ali Saleh and many other members of President Saleh's inner circle. As the heir apparent (obviously this is no longer the case), Ahmed Ali Salih was a natural rival to Ali Muhsin, who has been waiting in the wings for years. Ali Muhsin also resented the fact that while money and materiel for his First Armored Division were being reduced, funds, much of them provided by U.S. military aid programs, were being lavished on Ahmed Ali Saleh's Republican Guard and Special Forces.

### Conclusion

Major General Ali Muhsin is sure to be a major player in deciding Yemen's immediate future. He continues to enjoy considerable support within the Yemeni Army and among a number of key tribes. At the time of this writing, judging from Ali Muhsin's public statements, it seems that he wants to act as something of an arbiter in the impasse between anti-government protesters and the Saleh regime. His intentions are perhaps more complex. Muhsin, like Saleh, is a master tactician when it comes to manipulating the northern tribes. His long frustrated ambitions to rise to power will certainly be guiding many of his decisions. Yet it is highly unlikely that he would ever be able to marshal the kind of support needed to hold Yemen together. He is a highly divisive figure who is loathed in much of the country's south and by the Houthis in the northwestern governorates. His very public defection and likely prominent role in the future of Yemen does not bode well for Yemen's stability. In the near term, his rivalry with Ahmed Ali Saleh and others within Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime greatly increases the risk of civil war.

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Note:

1. To view the Chatham House report, see [http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/files/12576\\_bp1108yemen.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/files/12576_bp1108yemen.pdf).

## Restoring the Caliphate in Yemen: A Look at Shaykh Abd al-Majid al-Zindani

By Andrew McGregor

After decades of loyalty to Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the country's best known and most controversial Islamic scholar has called for the regime's downfall and the creation of an Islamic Caliphate in the southern Arabian Peninsula. The defection of the influential Shaykh Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, whose name appears on the designated terrorist lists of the United States and the United Nations, is a major blow to President Saleh's attempts to rally support for his currently tottering, over three-decade-old regime.

### Early Career

Shaykh al-Zindani was born in a small village near the southern city of Ibb, some time between 1938 and 1942 (the date has never been clarified). He grew up in Ibb and Aden before leaving Yemen to pursue studies in pharmacology. Al-Zindani studied sciences at Cairo's Ain Shams University before turning to Islamic studies. After returning to Yemen in 1966 he worked in religious activities in Saudi Arabia, returning to Yemen in 1970 to begin organizing the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood based on his experience amongst Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood while a student in Egypt. After meeting Osama bin Laden in Saudi Arabia, al-Zindani also became involved in recruiting and transporting Saudi and Yemeni recruits to join the 1980s anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan.

Following the 1990 unification of Yemen, al-Zindani became a leading member of al-Tajammu al-Yemeni li'l-Islah (Yemeni Congregation for Reform, commonly known as al-Islah). Led by Shaykh Abdullah al-Ahmar (d. 2007), chief of the Hashid tribal confederation, al-Islah came to combine tribal groups along with former GPC members, local Salafists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood in a single political party with a broad commitment to Islamizing Yemen, but without getting into the kind of details that might divide the alliance. Al-Zindani served as president of the party's Central Shura Council from 1995 to 2007, when he took a seat on the party's Supreme Board.



## Iman: An Islamic University

Al-Zindani founded Iman University in 1995 to implement his ideas on Islamic education. The Sana'a-based University opened its doors to foreign students (including American jihadis John Walker Lindh and Anwar al-Awlaki) and grew in popularity due to its free tuition, accommodation and food. However, there are reports that the institution is becoming a drain on Islah Party resources. [1]

An Islah Party member who graduated from Iman University said the institution was nothing more than “a large school of Quranic memorization” that does not even offer courses in Islamic philosophy and Arabic literature. According to the former student, all those attending the university are closely observed while having only limited access to censored internet and television facilities. By the time of graduation, students leave the campus believing “all women are corrupt and men are dissolute” (*Yemen Observer*, May 5, 2010).

A number of reputed graduates of Iman University are reported to have taken part in political violence in Yemen, including Ali Ahmad al-Jarallah, the 2002 assassin of Jarallah Omar, the deputy secretary general of the Yemen Socialist Party (YSP). Al-Zindani denied that the assassin had any connection to Iman, though the lawyer for Jarallah Omar's family sought to have the case reopened to question several new suspects, including al-Zindani (*Yemen Observer*, October 16, 2004; AP, July 3, 2004).

## Al-Zindani and the Global Jihad

The United States made al-Zindani a designated “global terrorist” in February 2004, accusing the shaykh of acting as a spiritual leader for al-Qaeda and fundraising for the organization through his Charitable Society for Social Welfare (CSSW). [2] Anwar al-Awlaki served as vice president of the CSSW from 1996 to 1999. The shaykh was also placed under sanctions by the UN Security Council. [3] Al-Zindani responded by demanding that the government of Yemen raise his terrorist designation at the UN Security Council (Yemen held one of the rotating non-permanent seats on the council at the time) while denouncing his U.S. designation: “The government [of Yemen] has already demanded that the United States administration bring its evidence against me... Their case against me is as strong as it was against Iraq when they accused it of developing weapons of

mass destruction” (*Yemen Observer*, October 16, 2004). As President Saleh defended al-Zindani and did his best to ignore the sanctions against the shaykh, al-Zindani made a temporary but strategic retreat from the global arena to increase his focus on domestic Yemeni politics. The shaykh suggested his terrorist designation was the result of accusations from the ruling GPC (though not Saleh) and of his own opposition to American foreign policy: “Is it not my right to object? Americans stand in front of the White House with banners protesting the government policy of the White House and it is their right. I am a citizen of whom these policies directly affect me, my nation and religion. Am I not allowed to say what is wrong? Where are human rights? We criticize the American policy that is 100% biased towards Zionism” (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 23, 2004).

Abd al-Majid Al-Zindani opposes Yemen's counter-terror cooperation with the United States, warning Yemenis of the possibility of foreign military occupation and “the return of colonialism”: “If parliament approved the occupation of Yemen, the people will rise against this parliament” (AFP, January 11, 2010). The position adopted by al-Zindani and other leading clerics in Yemen has been mocked by al-Qaeda deputy leader Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, who said it was pointless to wait for a foreign invasion to declare jihad when the Yemen government was already cooperating with the American military: “What more are they waiting for to call for jihad? ... Are they waiting for the US soldiers to appear on the streets of Sana'a in their tanks?”

Recently, al-Zindani has tried to distance himself from al-Qaeda, saying he has no knowledge of their activities in Yemen. He has similarly said he has no influence over the Yemeni-American jihadi preacher Anwar al-Awlaki, who has made his ancestral home of Yemen a base for pro-al-Qaeda propaganda activities: “I was never a direct teacher for Anwar al-Awlaki... Am I to be responsible for anyone who listens to my sermons or who reads my books?” (*Ibid.*).

As the head of a committee of Islamic scholars, al-Zindani condemned the terrorism of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in a November 2010 meeting with President Saleh. Al-Zindani's committee called on Yemen's Islamic scholars to focus on non-violence and to urge Yemen's Muslims to seek moderation rather than extremism (*Yemen Observer*, November 4, 2010). Regardless of al-Zindani's personal sympathies, there is little evidence that he is in any way connected to the



ongoing operations or activities of al-Qaeda, though of course this might have something to do with the absence of investigations in Yemen into his ties to the terrorist group.

### Medical Forays

Aside from his religious and political prominence in Yemen, al-Zindani has built a reputation based on his advocacy of *al-I'jiz al-ilmi fi al-Quran wa'l-Sunnah*, “the scientific wonders of the Quran and Sunnah.” Part of the Islamic revival, this intellectual trend involves finding proof of prior knowledge of modern scientific discoveries in the words of the Quran and Sunnah. With Saudi government funding from the Muslim World League, a Salafi NGO headquartered in Mecca, al-Zindani founded the Commission on Scientific Signs in the Quran and Sunnah in 1984, serving as the group’s secretary-general until 1995. Though he is no longer on the Muslim World League’s Commission, he is said to still regularly attend the organization’s annual gatherings.

In December 2006, al-Zindani announced he had developed “Eajaz-3,” an herbal cure for HIV/AIDS that had no side effects while eliminating the virus in humans (*Yemen Observer*, December 19, 2006; see *Terrorism Monitor*, April 6, 2007). However, the head of the Clinical Immunology Services at Jeddah’s King Abdulaziz University refuted al-Zindani’s claims after inspecting provided blood samples, even going so far as to say if he was the Minister of Health, he would throw al-Zindani in jail (*Yemen Observer*, November 19, 2009; *Yemen Times*, April 4, 2008). Nonetheless, al-Zindani went on to claim that he and his medical team of researchers from all over the Arab world had also discovered treatments for Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C and Diabetes (Saba, April 12, 2008).

### The Regime’s Man

Abd al-Majid Al-Zindani enjoyed great influence in Yemen when his al-Islah Party became the junior partner in a coalition led by the ruling General People’s Congress (GPC) in 1990. The shaykh even became a personal adviser to President Saleh in this period. This situation lasted until the alliance broke up in 1997 when Saleh’s GPC refused to introduce democratic reforms. [4] Though al-Islah was nominally part of the opposition from this point on, al-Ahmar and al-Zindani continued to maintain close connections to President Saleh.

When southern Yemen attempted to re-establish its independence in 1994, al-Zindani was able to use his contacts with Yemeni veterans of the Afghan jihad to raise a force of experienced fighters ready to combat a socialist southern Yemen on behalf of President Saleh and the regime in Sana’a.

Taking advantage of a growing number of vigilante incidents involving individuals enforcing Islamic law in several cities, al-Zindani created the Authority for Protecting Virtue and Fighting Vice (the Virtue Councils) in 2009 with the endorsement of President Saleh (*Yemen Times*, July 17, 2008). The councils were designed to identify infractions of Islamic law and report them to Yemeni police for enforcement.

Abd al-Majid Al-Zindani placed himself at the center of the Danish Muhammad cartoons controversy in Yemen by collecting funds to pursue lawsuits against newspapers and editors who republished the cartoons originally carried by Copenhagen’s *Jyllands-Posten*. However, the shaykh ran into solid opposition from Yemeni journalists and was embarrassed by revelations that the cartoons had already been reproduced and distributed at his Iman University (*NewsYemen*, March 3, 2006).

### Zindani Joins the Opposition

As leader of the Yemeni Religious Scholars Society, al-Zindani played an important role in coordinating the scholars with the political opposition coalition, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), in an effort to form a government of national unity that would make changes to the constitution, release political prisoners and bring an end to the cycle of protests taking place across Yemen at the time of this writing (*NewsYemen*, February 28).

Only a week after describing anti-government demonstrations as “illegal,” al-Zindani marked his break with the Saleh regime by appearing before a crowd of tens of thousands of demonstrators in Sana’a, surrounded by a private security team of men armed with AK-47 assault rifles. The shaykh told those assembled that the president could only be removed by the “force of the people” before a new Islamic state could be formed to replace the current government (*Day Press [Damascus]*, March 2). Al-Zindani’s call for a *Khilafah rashidah*, a righteous Caliphate, was met with an enthusiastic response from those assembled. [5]

Apparently rattled by the continuing demonstrations and the defection of al-Zindani and other former prominent members of the regime, President Saleh declared his government was the victim of a nefarious plot created in Tel Aviv under American supervision (Day Press [Damascus], March 2). When word of Saleh's remarks reached his allies in Washington, he was compelled to quickly issue an apology.

In a lengthy interview with a local daily, American ambassador Gerald Feierstein said the United States would like to see "free and fair" elections in Yemen, though not if an Islamist party similar to Gaza's Hamas were to be empowered. More specifically, Feierstein warned against the election of al-Zindani: "Abdul Majid al-Zindani, as you know, is on the terrorism list both of the United States and the United Nations, so we would have a problem if he were elected President, absolutely... Zindani is on the terrorism list and therefore we would have a problem with him taking any kind of position in the government (Yemen Observer, March 14).

Following al-Zindani's break with Saleh, the government began a media campaign against the cleric, suddenly reminding one and all that Ambassador Feierstein had stated al-Zindani was still considered a wanted terrorist by the US and the UN (Yemen Times, March 13).

By mid-March, al-Zindani was reported to have left Sana'a for his home village of Arhab, just north of the capital, where he could count on the support of several hundred armed militants to defend him from potential government retribution (Marebpress.net, March 14).

### Conclusion

Traditionally protected by the president, Abd al-Majid al-Zindani has always appeared at the periphery of religious/political violence rather than at its core. Iman University operates with minimal supervision and the shaykh has always enjoyed wide access to all forms of media in Yemen, making him a popular figure in many parts of the country. Sanctions have never been applied to al-Zindani within Yemen and the very idea that he might be the subject of an investigation has seemed absurd until now. In reality, al-Zindani has made a bold decision to throw off the cloak of immunity offered by President Saleh, one that has served the shaykh well for many years. Al-Zindani's choice might be regarded as an insider's calculated assessment of President Saleh's current chances of political survival which appear slim to none. However, if the shaykh is serious

about establishing a Caliphate in Yemen, his recent maneuverings may also be the beginning of a calculated play for power.

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### Notes:

1. Al-Zindani later denied Lindh attended Iman University – see al-Arabiya, August 4, 2004.
2. To view the US Department of the Treasury's press release regarding al-Zindani being listed as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist, see: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/js1190.aspx>.
3. To view the Interpol-United Nations Security Council Special Notice, see: [http://www.interpol.int/public/Data/NoticesUN/Notices/Data/2006/53/2006\\_21653.asp](http://www.interpol.int/public/Data/NoticesUN/Notices/Data/2006/53/2006_21653.asp).
4. For the al-Islah Party, see Amr Hamzawy, *Between Government and Opposition: The Case of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform*, (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Papers 18, 2009), [http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/yemeni\\_congregation\\_reform.pdf](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/yemeni_congregation_reform.pdf).
5. See the video at: <http://nahdaproductions.org/islamic-revival/arab-world/item/483-the-famous-sheikh-zindani-in-yemen-calls-for-righteous-caliphate-to-massive-chants-march-2011>.

## Three Men from Basrah: A Glimpse at Key Shia Militants Guiding the Path of Iraq's Violent Politics

By Rafid Fadhil Ali

For years after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the city of Basrah saw the growing influence of various Shia militias. In addition to the better known and powerful Mahdi Army (Jaish al-Mahdi- JaM) of Moqtada al-Sadr and its rival Badr Corps, the military arm of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution for Iraq (SCIRI) led by the al-Hakeem family, there were other, lesser known armed groups that operated openly in Basrah until the crackdown ordered by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in 2008 under the name *Saulat al-Fursan* (Operation Charge of the Knights). The activities of the militias dropped significantly since the crackdown. However, most of the armed groups, which dually operate as political parties, were not sufficiently disbanded and many of their leading figures have become recognized politicians with roles in Iraq's local and national politics. This profile focuses on three murky Shia leaders who either had or still have a considerable role in both the Iraqi and Basrawi Shia political spectrums and their attendant sectarian conflicts.

### Dagher al-Mossawi: Between Politics and Jihad

Sayyed Dagher Jassim Kadhum al-Mossawi is the secretary general of Harakat Sayyed al-Shuhada'a (The Movement of the Master of the Martyrs- HSS). He was one of the Iranian-based Iraqi Shia fighters who, starting from early 1980s, launched a cross-border rebellion against Saddam Hussein's regime. The rebellion was led by Badr Corps, the military arm of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), whose leader, the late Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakeem, was assassinated in Najaf on August 30, 2003.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein and the dissolution of the Ba'ath party, al-Mossawi reentered Iraq and became active in the political process, both locally in Basrah and nationally in Baghdad. The HSS appeared as one of the Shia political groups that operated under the domination of the SCIRI. This was part of a political tactic applied by the SCIRI to expand and exaggerate its influence over the Shia political spectrum. Another theory suggests that this was an Iranian plan to maintain its control on various Shia factions with different names.

In 2005 a coalition of the main Shia groups led by the then leader of SCIRI (which has since changed its moniker to The Iraqi Islamic Supreme Council –IISC) Abdul Aziz al-Hakeem won the highest numbers of seats in the Iraqi parliament. Dagher al-Mossawi became a member of the parliament and chairman of the Tribal Affairs Committee.

Al-Mossawi is portrayed negatively in the Sunni-leaning and pro-Ba'athist media as a tool of Iran's clerical regime. According to a biography of him published on [Almansore.com](http://Almansore.com), he is a member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard: "Dagher al-Mossawi (a.k.a. Abu Ahmad al-Shami) is a Brigadier General in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)." He is a graduate of the Command and Staff class in the IRGC's Imam Hussein University before joining the IRGC's Qods Force on April 2, 1991. He was assigned by the Qods Force to form the terrorist organization of the HSS to be the secret military arm of the SCIRI. But because of the complications of the situation in southern Iraq after the war they decided to go public. Al-Mossawi attended two conferences in Iran in 2003 where he met Iranian Supreme Leader Ali al-Khamenei and the Qods Force leader General Qassim Suleimani. Suleimani explained to al-Mossawi the Iranian plan to destabilize Iraq and target the American forces based there. In March 2004 the two convened in Iran once again when the Suleimani gave his order to the al-Mossawi and other operatives to begin their attacks against the U.S.-led coalition.

In HSS propaganda and through sympathetic media outlets, Dagher al-Mossawi is portrayed as a respected politician. He frequently mediates in tribal disputes in southern Iraq and brokers deals and truces that defuse tension and forge a civil peace. Although he is not a cleric, al-Mossawi's name is preceded by honorifics that are usually only bestowed upon lauded Shia clerics ([parliament.iq](http://parliament.iq), April 21, 2008). Al-Mossawi appears always in Western suits rather than flowing clerical garb or military fatigues.

The main focus of al-Mossawi and his group has been always their base in Basrah. He has been vocal in his criticism for the dearth of municipal services, unemployment and inefficient governance. He accuses Iraqi and foreign powers of blocking the development and reconstruction in Basrah. In 2009 he said that there was a conspiracy afoot against Basrah and all of southern Iraq with a goal of keeping the region dependant on importing its needs (al-Hakaek, June 10, 2009).



After the poor results of the Shia religious parties, including the HSS, in the parliamentary election in March 2010, al-Mossawi seemed to be looking for new strategies. However, he did not stray far from his Basrah contacts. The HSS recently united with two other Basrah-based parties to form Harakat al-Jihad wal-Bina'a (The Jihad and Development Movement- HJB) and al-Mossawi became the deputy leader of the new party (Alghalibon.net, January, 16, 2011).

### Yusuf Sanawi: Harakat Thar' Allah's Brutal Leader

Yousif Sanawi was the leader of Harakat Thar' Allah (Allah's Revenge Movement- HTA). Sanawi and his relatively small militia were a symbol of terror for the local population of Basrah. It was widely believed that he was behind the killing of many academics, doctors and ordinary civilians, particularly women. There were leaks that he confessed to many of these murders after his arrest in April 2008 (Basratuna.net, May 5, 2008).

Sanawi emerged as a militia leader and politician after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, he claimed that he formed his group in 1995 and launched assassination attempts against prominent Ba'athists in Basrah.

Sanawi, who was a marine civilian officer before the war, developed a network of followers who were active in Basrah's harbor area in the post-war era. With his men reportedly armed with weapons they looted from the camps of the old Iraqi army, Sanawi became a local warlord. He was involved in oil smuggling to neighboring countries, which enabled him to accumulate wealth and consolidate his power. Few dared challenging Sanawi during this period. In mid-2006 Sanawi's group had a confrontation with the local government in which his fighters fought police in pitched battles that lasted for several days. Sanawi's brother was killed in that incident but Sanawi, nonetheless, maintained much of his influence (Abul khasib.net, May 7, 2008).

Sanawi's real power was believed to be his relations with the Iranian Intelligence Service (Itila'at). It was reported that the actual number of the members of Sanawi's militia was 32. They were reportedly trained by the Itila'at and have no direct link to the IRGC's Qods force, which is believed to be supporting many of the other more mainstream Shia militias (Al-Jarida, June 16, 2008).

Yusuf Sanawi's activities were not all military in nature. Candidates for HTA ran for both the local and general

elections in 2005. Although the HTA did not succeed in either, Sanawi remained a political player in Basrah. He joined a coalition of five Shia parties in the city that included al-Hakeem's SCIRI and Dagher al-Mossawi's HSS. He was even nominated for an appointment as a member of a local council but was blocked by members of other parties who denounced his notorious reputation (Albasrah.net, July 12, 2009).

Though Yusuf Sanawi was arrested in a house raid on April 3, 2008, during a far-reaching Iraqi Army operation aimed at routing the JaM in Basrah called Charge of the Knights, his whereabouts today remain unknown. In 2009 an Iraqi court sentenced him to life in prison. Reports surfaced that he had in fact been executed while other leaked documents suggested that he died under torture. Still yet, other sources revealed that he had actually fled prison and disappeared (Iraq-ina.com, May 26, 2009; al-Badeel, April 4, 2008; al-Ghad, July 14, 2008).

### Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis: Terrorist or Peacemaker?

Jamal Jafa'ar al-Ibrahim (a.k.a. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis) was a member of the Iraqi parliament between 2005-2010 from the principal Shia bloc, The Iraqi National Alliance (INA). Al-Muhandis is described by the Sunni media in Iraq as the right-hand man of Qods Force chief General Qassim Suleimani. The U.S. Department of the Treasury designated al-Muhandis under Executive Order 13438 as a threat to "peace and stability" in Iraq because he was both a Qods Force "advisor" and because of his purported involvement (some accounts describe him as the group's leader) with the Shia insurgent organization Kata'ib Hezbollah (AFP, July 1, 2009; see *Terrorism Monitor*, March 4, 2010). Al-Muhandis is also reportedly linked to the assassination attempt, via suicide bombing, against the late Kuwaiti Emir Sheik Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah, on May 26, 1985 (UPI, October 7, 2010).

According to his media office, al-Muhandis was born in Basrah in 1954 and holds degrees in Civil Engineering and Political Science. He fled Iraq for neighboring Kuwait in 1980 after a Ba'athist crackdown on Shia political activists and clergy (Abomahdi.net, date n.a.).

Al-Muhandis fled Kuwait to Iran after accusations arose of his involvement in near simultaneous attacks on the American and French embassies in Kuwait City on December 12, 1983. The charges surfaced again when al-Muhandis returned to Iraq and became a member of

parliament in 2006. In response to the allegations, al-Muhandis reentered Iran and did not attend sessions of Iraqi parliament for the next several years. He accused the U.S. government of threatening to kill him and denied any involvement in the Kuwait attacks: “I personally received many threatening letters by the American ambassador and the White House. All of those letters included threats of killing me. The speaker of the parliament was asked to hand me over to the occupying forces. I was asked by members of the parliament to leave the country and spear the government and the parliament further embarrassment. As a result I decided to leave” (Al-Rai al-A’am, December 17, 2009).

Although al-Muhandis describes himself as a peacemaker and mediator in times of crisis in Iraq, he does not deny that he supports the armed resistance. Yet he condemned the attacks of some of the insurgent groups on civilian targets and accused U.S. intelligence of being involved in such violence: “Such attacks against civilian targets were launched to incite sectarian violence. The groups behind those attacks are supported by America and foreign countries. Everyone knows that there is a role for American intelligence in inciting sectarian conflict” (Al-Rai al-A’am, June 17, 2009).

Between the accusation against al-Muhandis of being the IRGC’s point man inside Iraq and his playing down of such an assessment, the mystery of this man will probably remain unsolved for some time. He spends most of his time in Iran but periodically reemerges to play a role in Iraqi politics and conflicts. When it comes to his real power and relations with Tehran, al-Muhandis does not deny his strong ties to the Islamic Republic but denied that he worked for its interests: “I was the leader of Badr Corps and a leading figure in the SCIRI, and Iran was our base as [the] Iraqi opposition structure. It was obvious that I would have strong relations with many services and agencies to facilitate our activities especially that I lived in Iran for more than twenty years. But is it sensible to think that a regional superpower like Iran would depend on me only as an individual? If it had really depended on me it would have created a big party to give me a political framework to operate.”

With the date of the complete withdrawal of American troops in Iraq slated for December 31, 2011 fast approaching as per the U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and his possible return to Baghdad will be a thorny issue. Sunni political actors will undoubtedly attempt to stall al-Muhandis’

integration back into mainstream politics which will further complicate the complex path toward Iraqi national reconciliation.

Al-Muhandis will likely continue to cause problems not only for Iraq’s domestic political arena but also for its neighbor, as a fresh legal case against him mounts in Kuwait. Iraq and Kuwait are trying to reset their troubled relations in the post-Saddam Hussein era and dealing with al-Muhandis will make this goal much more difficult. The outstanding issues regarding Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis will also test future ties between Baghdad and Washington and their respective counter-terrorism policies following the planned American military withdrawal at the close of this year.

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## **Taking Charge of Libya's Rebels: An In-Depth Portrait of Colonel Khalifa Haftar**

*By Derek Henry Flood*

### Background

On March 14, 2011, Khalifa Haftar, a dissident Libyan Army colonel and long time foe of Colonel Mu'ammarr al-Qaddafi, reappeared in Benghazi, the opposition's supposedly temporary de facto administrative center, to lead Libya's chaotic rebellion (al-Jazeera, March 14). For many years Haftar has been the commander-in-exile of the Libyan National Army (LNA). The LNA is the armed wing of the National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NFSL), a significant Libyan exile entity operating mostly outside of Libya's borders for several decades. A rebel spokesman in Benghazi told a pan-Arab daily that Colonel Haftar's arrival from the West on the ground in Libya's Cyrenaica region was a significant boost to a movement that desperately needed a jolt of energy. "Col. Haftar has in fact returned and is now in eastern Libya. His return has boosted the morale of the young revolutionaries. Haftar has returned and we believe that his officers and soldiers have returned with him. All of them were training during the past six years. They have returned to confront Al-Qadhafi [sic]. This is their time" (al-Sharq al-Awsat, March 15). Today, as Colonel Haftar finally returns to the battlefields of North Africa with the objective of toppling Qaddafi, his former co-conspirator from Libya's 1969 coup, he may stand as the best liaison for the United States and allied NATO forces in dealing with Libya's unruly rebels.

Though it is not clear at the time of this writing how much actual control Haftar has over rebel soldiers and volunteers on the frontline, after his appointment as "Commander in Chief" of opposition forces calling themselves the "Army of Free Libya," he stated that he has entered the fight to avenge the injustices committed against the Libyan people by Qaddafi. Haftar stated that he does not view the present fight against Tripoli as an opportunistic moment to settle a nearly quarter century-old grudge against Qaddafi (al-Sharq al-Awsat, March 19). Before Haftar's return to Benghazi, the Interim National Transitional Council announced that former General Omar al-Hariri, who tried to overthrow al-Qaddafi in 1975, would be the head of military affairs

for the rebel forces. General al-Hariri was imprisoned until 1990. He was then put under closely monitored house arrest, in place until the February 17 revolution commenced. Al-Hariri is listed on the Interim National Transitional Council's website as being responsible for the opposition's "military affairs." The Council has not issued a similar press release in regard to Haftar's status, and many frontline rebels are not clear on which of the two men is currently in charge.

Colonel Haftar hails from the Farjani tribe (alternately known as Farjan) in the central coastal city of Sirte. He had been committed to Colonel al-Qaddafi when he seized power in the One September Revolution of 1969 which overthrew King Idris and the royal Sanussi order. Haftar was subsequently rewarded by being made a member of Qaddafi's Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). [1]

### Interpersonal Struggles

Haftar was the overall leading commander of Libyan troops in the 1980-1987 Libyan-Chadian conflict until he was captured by then Chadian President Hissène Habré's forces. Upon his capture by the Habré regime, he betrayed Qaddafi and then set his sights on deposing his former comrades in the Free Unionist Officers movement ruling in Tripoli. Haftar set up the LNA on June 21, 1988 [2] with strong backing from the Central Intelligence Agency and according to some sources also received Saudi funding and Israeli training. The Libyan Army defectors comprising the LNA, sometimes referred to as the "Haftar Force," were termed "Contras" in the Cold War parlance of the era denoting their outlook as counter-revolutionaries struggling against al-Qaddafi's eternal revolutionary state. Haftar dismissed the Contra label as "meaningless," stating that the LNA is a "Libyan organization with Libyan interests and Libyan goals" (al-Hayat, December 19, 1991). He said that while the LNA was temporarily basing itself in the United States, with 400 members dispersed across 25 states, he stressed that most of his outfit's original support was indeed Libyan and Arab (al-Hayat, December 18, 1991).

While Haftar and between 600-700 fellow defecting soldiers were bolstered and equipped by U.S. intelligence after the formation of LNA in late 1988, history was not on Haftar's side until 2011. General Idriss Déby, former commander-in-chief of the Chadian Armed Forces for several years during the war with the legitimate Libyan Army led by Haftar and Libyan-backed Chadian rebels



in Chad's troubled northern BET Region, turned on the Habré government. Déby was backed by Tripoli in this scenario which ultimately resulted in the American plans for Khalifa Haftar to infiltrate Libya to be shelved.

Colonel Haftar was no longer welcome in Chad following the December 1990 military coup by Idriss Déby that deposed President Habré. Relations between Habré and Déby soured irrevocably with Habré accusing Déby of conspiring against him. Déby ousted his former mentor with Sudanese backing (IRIN, April 19, 2006). Following Habré's overthrow, a brief warming of relations between N'Djamena and Tripoli occurred as Déby pragmatically flirted with the Libyan regime in order to consolidate his rule over Chad's vast territory. Haftar's rebels were ejected from Chad in the process, dispersing them throughout Africa. Those that chose not to return to Libya under an amnesty offered by Qaddafi were eventually resettled in the United States when their security in Africa was in doubt. [3]

Many questions have arisen among Western analysts in regard to the precise ideological nature and religious leanings of Libya's rebel *Shabaab* movement since the outbreak of internecine hostilities there on February 17, 2011. The movement, now led at least partly by Colonel Haftar, is an ad hoc revolutionary one that is not monolithic in terms of either long term strategy or ideology. Libyan opposition movements like the NFSL/LNA have existed for decades before the current war and have been led by men like Khalifa Haftar weaned on the Arab nationalism of the mid-twentieth century. Libya's exiled opposition groups tended to mix modernist secularism with traditional Arab and Bedouin Islamism partly in reaction to al-Qaddafi's assault on Libyan Muslim identity. [4] The challenge before Colonel Haftar is whether he can graft his experience and know-how from wars and ideologies past onto a young movement already in disarray.

Khalifa Haftar has been on the run from the al-Qaddafi regime since his capture in Chad in March 1987 following Libya's disastrous defeat at the battle of Ouadi Doum in northern Chad's Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti (BET) Region. Qaddafi, whom Haftar had considered a close friend, was said to deny Haftar's very existence while he languished in a Chadian POW camp for seven months. In reaction, an infuriated Haftar joined the LNSF at Habré's behest and declared war against the Libyan state. [5] Hissène Habré, a staunch American ally in Africa in the context of the Cold War who Human Rights Watch now terms an "African Pinochet," released Haftar from

detention after the two pragmatically put aside their differences. The Reagan administration planned to utilize Khalifa Haftar to oust al-Qaddafi during his time in Chad. Haftar spent the next three years (1988-1991) in encampments surrounding N'Djamena training his soldiers for an eventual operation to overthrow al-Qaddafi. This plan was not to be as the geopolitical realities shifted in the Sahel/Sahara region before Haftar could be deployed into Libya proper. The entire covert project would be abruptly aborted.

### Idriss Déby Moves In, Khalifa Haftar Moves On

As Idriss Déby's Sudan-backed rebel movement gained momentum, Haftar knew his position in Chad would be jeopardized when Hissène Habré would inevitably fall. He devised a plan to mount an assault on French troops stationed outside the capital deployed as part of Opération Épervier. Épervier was a force dispatched by French President François Mitterrand to contain Libyan aggression in Chad. Haftar felt that France favored Idriss Déby at the expense of the LNA and that he was threatened by Déby's rebel advance toward the capital. Though France had been a long time supporter of Habré, he ultimately fell victim to the cooling of Franco-Chadian relations. The French remained, at least officially, neutral as Habré was quickly deposed. Colonel al-Qaddafi, sensing an opportunity with the changing of the guard in N'Djamena, relayed to Déby that he wanted the renegade Haftar repatriated to Tripoli, an act that might have meant certain death for Haftar.

Though General Déby did not comply with the Libyan request for the extradition of the dissident soldiers, Déby informed the United States that the Libyan rebels, many of whom he had personally fought, were no longer welcome in N'Djamena either and allowed them to be quietly shuttled out of the country. Déby's unsympathetic position toward Haftar may be why Chad has yet to make any noise about aiding the rebels in the current war, as remaining bitterness between the two men is certainly not out of the question.

Déby tried to keep Habré at bay in Cameroon where he had fled after the coup d'état (AP, December 2, 1990). Chad's new leader accurately sensed his people's fatigue after years of unending conflict. He astutely opted out of fomenting further tension with al-Qaddafi at the time publicizing the American-supported LNA being evacuated from N'Djamena (Los Angeles Times, December 9, 1990) Déby was also much less interested in

being an American proxy in Africa than his predecessor. The ascent of Idriss Déby greatly altered the trajectory of Haftar's life. [6]

### Flight

In a 1997 memoir by the late Smith Hempstone, the U.S. Ambassador to Kenya during the administration of George H.W. Bush, Hempstone describes what was unofficially referred to as "Operation Magic Carpet", a clandestine effort to spirit Haftar's followers out of Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) where they were potentially vulnerable to al-Qaddafi's far reaching hit teams and possible entente between al-Qaddafi and Mobutu at the time. [7]

Haftar later fled N'Djamena following the Déby takeover and was flown on an American Hercules to Nigeria with much of the LNA. Circumstances in Nigeria did not permit them to stay in the country longer than 24 hours. American facilitators forwarded them to Zaire. Between 300-400 of Haftar's roving, CIA-connected rebels had to flee Zaire after the U.S. Congress quashed a plan to funnel \$5,000,000 to Mobutu's regime to let the Libyans exist in his kleptocracy where they could regroup and plot against al-Qaddafi for another day. When the American plan to essentially pay off Mobutu was scrapped, Colonel al-Qaddafi funneled an undisclosed amount of money to Mobutu. For his part, al-Qaddafi demanded the return of the Zaire-based LNA fighters, particularly the leadership. Colonel Haftar called on his American connections to be brought directly to the U.S. from Zaire. The U.S. quickly obliged Haftar but the arrangement still left several hundred rebels behind in limbo.

Haftar's Libyan fighters then landed in President Daniel arap Moi's Kenya where American officials hoped the Libyans would be welcomed, after a generous offer of cash to arap Moi's debt burdened regime. [8] Though initially agreeing to receive funding from the U.S. in a quid pro quo for housing the Libyans, a month on Nairobi had a change of heart after President arap Moi got wind of harsh American criticism of his deplorable human rights record (Washington Post, May 18, 1991). Once it became clear that the presence of the Haftar Force in Kenya was no longer a viable option, American officials conceived a plan to airlift the then now stateless rebels to the United States and resettle them as political refugees. Haftar ended up relocating from Chad's desert wastes to Fairfax County, Virginia, a suburb of Washington D.C. Being aware that many rebels were

still in Zaire even after the Virginia and Kenya airlifts, al-Qaddafi then employed a heavy psychological tactic by transporting the wives and sons of the remaining rebels to Zaire to lure them back to Libya. The 250 men remaining in Zaire took Libya up on its intimidating enticement. They were flown home to be ostensibly reunited with their families (al-Hayat, December 19, 1991).

### All Was Not Quiet In the Interim

Haftar's time in sub-Saharan African limbo at the outset of the 1990s was not his last gasp in wanting to overthrow al-Qaddafi. After the LNA and NFSL apparently drifted apart for several years, the Libyan exiles interest converged once again when, in the spring of 1996, Haftar reportedly instigated an insurrection in Cyrenaica's historically defiant al-Jebel al-Akhdar region near the eastern city of Derna that raged at Haftar's direction but was swiftly crushed (Reuters, March 26, 1996). [9] Reports at the time suggested that some of rebels in the al-Jebel al-Akhdar incident were those fostered in Chad by the CIA prior to the 1990 coup. [10] Nearly a decade after his defection, Haftar was linked to a failed coup attempt against al-Qaddafi (al-Majid [Amman], August 5, 1996) [11] Somewhat incongruously, a report citing unnamed Arab sources in Tripoli surfaced four years after the 1996 incidents that Haftar was considering returning to his native land. Haftar, through a spokesman, flatly refuted the speculation, suggesting it may have been disinformation spread by the Libyan intelligence services and noted: "We also have heard the reports of his intention to return. I spoke to him a short time ago and I can assure you that Col. Haftar is in the United States and is not thinking about returning" (al-Sharq al-Awsat, December 16, 2000).

### Conclusion

In a sense, Colonel Khalifa Haftar's personal odyssey strings together a policy continuum of overt hostility between Washington and Mu'ammarr al-Qaddafi. At the time of the United States' most direct confrontation with Colonel al-Qaddafi on April 15, 1986 with airstrikes on military installations in Benghazi and Tripoli, Colonel Haftar was in good standing as one of the founding members of the RCC and was loyally commanding al-Qaddafi's forces in the Libyan quagmire in Chad. Twenty-five years on, the American military alongside its NATO partners, is intervening in the 2011 Libyan civil war where Haftar has suddenly reemerged to build

force structure amongst Libya's chaotic rebels. It must be noted that in stark difference to the largely civil society led revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, the war in Libya, as the odyssey of Khalifa Haftar's life demonstrates, is as much, if not more tied to the African world as the Arab one. The Kalashnikov-powered revolution now being commanded on the front by Haftar has a very deep African dimension to it, owing to Libya's modern military history and inescapable political geography. While Tunisia and Egyptian foreign policies correspond largely to the greater Mediterranean-Levant regions, Colonel al-Qaddafi's efforts since 1969 have dragged Libya southward into sub-Saharan Africa.

While lawmakers and policy analysts in the West are repeatedly stating that they do not know just who Libya rebels are and to what degree they may be influenced by the transnational jihadism espoused by al-Qaeda, at the helm of this movement is Colonel Khalifa Haftar, an old school secular Nasserist who has lived in the United States for twenty years. In a 1991 interview conducted in an LNA camp in rural Virginia, Haftar stated that he mostly closely identified himself with Omar al-Mukhtar, the legendary anti-colonial resistance leader hanged by Italian administrators in Libya in 1931. As al-Mukhtar challenged Benito Mussolini, an external tyrant, Haftar sees himself along a similar historical path in his lifelong battle with Colonel Mu'ammarr al-Qaddafi, the quintessential tyrant. Haftar, the former CIA confidant in Africa and now a veteran, hardline anti-Qaddafi activist, may prove to be the most apt conduit for the U.S./NATO and their Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners.

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