



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

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AQIM LEADERS MOKHTAR BELMOKHTAR AND ABDELMALEK DROUKDEL SPLIT

Mokhtar Belmokhtar is an Algerian-born former commander of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). In July, he was reported to have been killed or seriously injured in the battle of Gao, in which AQIM supported the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) and seized control of Gao from the Tuareg-led National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) (see Terrorism Monitor Brief, July 12). Although the rumor of his death proved to be false, in October new reports emerged that he was removed from his AQIM combat unit, the Mulathamín Brigade. In December more rumors emerged about Belmokhtar. Now he is believed to have left AQIM in order to focus his efforts in sub-Saharan countries outside of the traditional Maghreb region, such as Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger (AFP, December 3). According to Omar Ould Hamaha, a former deputy of Belmokhtar and recent chief of staff of MUJWA, Belmokhtar will still remain under the orders of al-Qaeda Central (AP, October 15).

Belmokhtar's departure from AQIM results from his falling out of favor of AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel and other members of AQIM who question Belmokhtar's commitment to Shari'a because of Belmokhtar's reputation as a weapons and drug smuggler (AFP, October 15). He is now planning to establish a new battalion named "Mouakoun Bidima" the "Signatories by Blood" (*Le Temps d'Algerie*, December 7). In a video that Belmokhtar released after his dismissal, he said that he had foreign militants under his command and that they were prepared for suicide bombings. [1] He also warned all countries against intervening in Mali.

Meanwhile, Abdelmalek Droukdel is also sending a warning to European and African countries against any military intervention in Mali. In a video message, he said, "If you want peace and security in your country, we are for it. If you want war, the Sahara is a large graveyard for



Mokhtar Belmokhtar
(a.k.a. Laouar) leaves AQIM

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your soldiers and a disaster for your interests.” Belmokhtar and Droukdel may have parted ways, but they share common ground on threatening the international coalition against intervention. Whether they will follow up and fight the international forces in conventional battles in the cities, engage in guerilla combat, or return to their desert smuggling ways will be known once the intervention begins, as expected, in early 2013.

Notes

1. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KV4vgFqiifM>, December 5.
2. See: <http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=188811>, December 3.

PAKISTANI TALIBAN LEADERSHIP CHANGE EXPECTED IN 2013

The Pakistani Taliban is planning to change its leadership in 2013. Hakimullah Mahsud, who was elected chief of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistani (TTP) in 2009, will be replaced. According to Pakistan military officials, Wali ur Rehman is the likely new leader of the TTP. Rahman is on the U.S. State Department’s Most Wanted list, with a \$5 million reward for information leading to his capture. Among other militant activities, he has participated in cross-border attacks in Afghanistan against U.S. and NATO personnel and was allegedly involved in the attack against CIA officers on December 30, 2009, at Forward Operating Base Chapman in Khost, Afghanistan (*Indian Express*, December 7). In the attack, a Jordanian citizen posing as an informant carried out a suicide bombing during a meeting with CIA officers, killing seven officers. It was the highest number of CIA officers to have been killed in a single attack since the 1983 U.S. Embassy bombing in Beirut, Lebanon. The State Department has offered a \$5 million reward for information leading to Mahsud’s capture.

The change in leadership is related to the U.S. plans to significantly reduce its troop presence in Afghanistan in 2013. Whereas Hakimullah Mahsud is known to be a “brutal commander,” Rehman is “a more pragmatic [leader] for whom reconciliation has become a priority (*Express Tribune*, December 7).” This strategy may allow the TTP to portray itself as responsible for expediting the withdrawal of the U.S. forces and boost TTP morale and momentum as Afghanistan and Pakistan move into a post-U.S. withdrawal era after a decade of intense U.S. military involvement in

the country. A reduction of tensions with the Pakistani government would allow the TTP to focus on Afghanistan and, according to a Pakistani official, “complicate Western efforts to stabilize Afghanistan before most NATO troops leave by the end of 2014 (ANI [New Delhi], December 7).”

Egypt’s Threat from Within: Who’s Who in the Madinat Nasr Cell

Andrew McGregor

Amidst new political turmoil in Egypt, the investigation continues into the extent of the radical Islamist network disrupted by an October 24 police raid on the militants’ armory in the Cairo suburb of Madinat Nasr. [1] A number of those arrested during the Madinat Nasr raid or as a result of subsequent investigations into the cell are experienced jihadists, many with connections to Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri’s Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), which formally merged with al-Qaeda in 2001. Others possess military experience and may have been prepared to turn their knowledge of arms and tactics against the post-revolutionary Egyptian state, though some of the detainees claim the Madinat Nasr cell was directed primarily at running Libyan arms to Islamist groups fighting the Assad regime in Syria. Here, then, is a short look at the profiles of some of the major figures arrested or being sought in connection with the raid on the Madinat Nasr cell:

Shaykh Adil Awad Shahtu – A former leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Shahtu was arrested on charges of establishing and financing the Madinat Nasr cell (Dar al-Hayat, October 31). Shahtu, a leading member of EIJ, was imprisoned in Egypt in 1991 following his return from three years in Afghanistan and was not released until March, 2011 after the fall of Hosni Mubarak. Shahtu was one of the leaders of the September 11 protest at the U.S. embassy in Cairo. The Interior Ministry reported that Shahtu was arrested while trying to slip into Libya with a large quantity of cash in different currencies (*al-Hayat*, November 1).

Shahtu is a vocal opponent of the democracy that brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt: “I oppose democracy because it is not the faith of the Muslims, but the faith of the Jews and Christians. Simply put, democracy means the rule of the people itself over itself... According to Islam, it is forbidden for people to rule and to legislate laws,

as Allah alone is ruler.” In the shaykh’s elitist interpretation of Islamic rule, “commoners, such as workers and *fellahin* [Egypt’s traditional peasant class]” would be barred from participating in the Shura (consultative council) that advises the ruler. Shahtu has warned that “if the [Coptic] Christians make problems for the Muslims, I will exterminate you,” as well as insisting on a shutdown of the tourism industry and a ban on all the arts (*Roz Al-Yousef* (Cairo), August 13, 2011).

Since his arrest, Shahtu has maintained the Madinat Nasr cell was seeking only to support the revolution in Syria: “We disagree with the Muslim Brotherhood, but we do not consider its members as infidels. We were not targeting any Egyptian or Egyptian installations” (*al-Hayat*, November 4).

Wa’il Abd-al-Rahman – Identified as the “prime suspect” in the Madinat Nasr cell and described as a *takfiri* (a Muslim who accuses other Muslims of apostasy) and former member of the EIJ, al-Rahman was reported to have been arrested two months earlier and sentenced to jail on charges of seeking to overthrow the regime “and of judging the ruler [al-Mursi] as an infidel.” Police claim to have found gunpowder and other materials for manufacturing explosives in his house (*al-Hayat*, October 27; *al-Tahrir* [Cairo], October 31).

Muhammad Jamal al-Kashif (a.k.a. Abu-Ahmad) – A former EIJ leader released after the revolution, al-Kashif’s present location is unknown. Egyptian security services report that al-Kashif has been an active al-Qaeda operative in Yemen and Libya and had been given orders by Dr. al-Zawahiri to lead terrorist operations in Egypt and Libya (*al-Dustur* [Cairo], October 28; *al-Hayat*, October 27).

Karim Isam Ahmad Azzazi – Forty-years-old, Karim Isam reportedly blew himself up during the raid (*al-Hayat*, October 31). According to the autopsy report, the beardless suspect died of burns and showed no trace of bullets (*al-Tahrir* [Cairo], October 31). It is Karim Isam who allegedly rented the ground floor of a 15-storey property in Madinat Nasr and undertook a number of renovations, including the installation of an iron door and the creation of a private parking area from which visitors to the site could enter the building unobserved (*al-Wafd* [Cairo], October 28).

Karim Ahmad al-Badawi (a.k.a. Abu Hazim) – A 53-year-old Egyptian from Cairo Governorate who is reported to have died during the raid, possibly as a result of being shot by police while fleeing (*al-Akhbar*, October 26). The exact circumstances of his fate remain unclear, largely due to considerable confusion in the local media between

Karim Ahmad al-Badawi and Karim Isam Ahmad Azzazi (see above).

Rami Ahmad Muhammad al-Mallah – A former radar specialist and captain in the Egyptian Army before resigning a short time ago following his decision to express his Islamist allegiance by growing a beard. An alleged leader of the Madinat Nasr cell, al-Mallah was arrested in downtown Cairo a day after the Madinat Nasr raid while trying to obtain a tourist visa to Turkey as part of a scheme to sneak into Syria (*al-Hayat*, October 28; November 3).

Muhammad Sa’id Merghani - The Tunisian suspect is believed to be an expert in the use of explosives and is thought to have taken part in the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi (*al-Jumharyah* [Cairo], October 29; *al-Shuruq al-Jadid* [Cairo], October 31). During his interrogation, Muhammad Sa’id admitted to being a member of the Tunisian Muslim Brotherhood and claimed that he was trying to make his way to Syria to join the insurgency (*al-Hayat*, November 4). Egypt’s security services have asked for Tunisian assistance in investigating this aspect of the case.

Tarik Abu al-Azm – A former Egyptian Army officer who has faced criminal charges before, al-Azm claims he was only friends with the cell leader and has no interest in politics.

Nasr Hani Hasan Rashid – Picked up two weeks after the raid, Nasr Hani is alleged to have returned from Libya at the beginning of November to carry out terrorist operations after receiving military training from al-Qaeda elements in Libya (*al-Shuruq al-Jadid* [Cairo], November 7).

Other suspected cell members either detained in the raid or on the run include Tarik Yahya Hulayl, Muhammad Salman Sulayman, Nabil Abd al-Moneim and Amr al-Rifa’i Surur.

Information available on the suspects so far suggests the growth of an Islamist network connecting militants from Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria. As Egypt enters a new political and constitutional crisis following the assumption of extraordinary powers by President Muhammad al-Mursi, there will be new opportunities for Egypt’s Salafi-Jihadi community to press its agenda through a return to the armed conflict that raged between Islamists and Egyptian authorities in the 1990s.

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Note

1. See Andrew McGregor, “The Face of Egypt’s Next Revolution: The Madinat Nasr Cell,” Jamestown Foundation Hot Issue, November 20, 2012, Available at: [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=40137&cHash=bc3b95312dc7c4911c1727f4b929e2fd](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=40137&cHash=bc3b95312dc7c4911c1727f4b929e2fd).

A Profile of Syrian Jihadist Omar Bakri Muhammad

Elie Issa

Omar Bakri Muhammad (a.k.a. the “Tottenham Ayatollah”) is a self-proclaimed advocate of jihadism who has recently called for jihad in Syria against the Assad regime. Bakri, who was expelled from the UK in 2005 for “glorifying terrorism,” said that al-Qaeda plans to wage war against the Syrian regime (*As-Safir*, January 26). Such statements from self-described al-Qaeda and jihadism laureates do not fit within the international war on terrorism and Islamic extremism.

Bakri was born in Aleppo, Syria in 1958 into a supposedly wealthy family. Like other prominent hardline Islamic clerics, Bakri was enrolled at the age of five in an Islamic boarding school where he learned how to recite the Quran by heart. Years later, Bakri joined the Shari’a Institute at Damascus University where he studied advanced Islamic sciences. He then joined the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood but left the country in 1977 after getting his Bachelor’s degree in Shari’a and *Usul al-Fiqh* (legal theory). Bakri fled to Beirut fearing prosecution by Syrian authorities for his ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. In Lebanon, he obtained his Master’s degree in Islamic studies from Imam Uzaie University before leaving for Cairo in 1979 to attend al-Azhar University. Prior to earning his degree, Bakri left al-Azhar for Saudi Arabia due to disagreements with his teachers.

In 1984, the Saudis arrested Bakri in Jeddah and released him on bail. Bakri was again held by the Saudis in December 1985 before moving to the United Kingdom on January 14, 1986, where he eventually assumed the leadership of Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation) and became their spiritual leader. In 1996, Bakri deserted Hizb ut-Tahrir and initiated al-Muhajiroun (The Immigrants), remaining its Amir until 2003.

Bakri described the 9/11 attacks as “magnificent” and eventually altered his preaching toward the theology and

philosophy of al-Qaeda. He explained, “When I first heard about the September 11, 2001 attacks there was some initial delight about such an attack. I received a phone call and said, ‘Oh, wow, the United States has come under attack.’ It was exciting” (al-Arabiya, September 13, 2001).

Bakri said that hardline Salafi Muslim groups, including al-Qaeda and his own al-Ghuraba group, were ready to help their “Muslim brothers” with a campaign of suicide attacks against President Bashar al-Assad. “Al-Qaeda are so clever, they can make so many weapons from nothing. They can go to any kitchen, make a very nice pizza bomb and deliver it fresh,” Bakri claimed. He described the regional uprisings that rocked the Middle East as “al-Qaeda’s victory.” The Arab Spring and “the dismantling of authoritarian regimes and ruthless intelligence services have given Salafist groups room to breathe; and the thousands of jailed Islamists in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, released as the dictatorships crumbled, have been perfect for recruiting,” he added (*As-Safir*, January 25).

Echoing the rhetoric of other jihadists, Bakri warned the West against staying in the Middle East. “In the future if anybody puts a finger on our nations we will fight back, we have our own men, our own power” (*As-Safir*, January 25).

In a recent interview with the Bulgaria-based Center for Middle East Studies, Bakri claimed that the suicide bomber who blew himself up near a civilian bus transporting Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria on July 18 was one of his “disciples.” [1] Bakri claimed that the suspect, identified as Mehdi Ghezali, was a Swedish citizen who was previously a Guantanamo inmate. [2] Both the Bulgarian and the Swedish governments refuted Bakri’s allegations. Bakri also claimed that al-Qaeda was responsible for the attack. “They have not taken responsibility because sometimes ‘freelance’ organizations carry out the attacks on their behalf. The same goes for the attack in Toulouse [June 20]. In both of these attacks my name came up as a spiritual teacher. I also had a student who exploded in Tel Aviv,” Bakri told the Center for Middle East Studies. [4]

Bakri’s statements imply a developing trend of radical jihadism that is rapidly gaining momentum among younger generations. “The head of the snake is America, so al-Qaeda is looking for big targets in the United States, but smaller organizations settle for smaller targets.” [3] Such rhetoric unfortunately continues to rally young followers in rural Pakistan, Afghanistan and other underprivileged areas in the Arab Peninsula.

Elie Issa is a Lebanese analyst focusing on the Middle East and North Africa regions for the past eight

years. His interests include geopolitical, security and macroeconomic topics.

Note

1. Omar Bakri, interview by the Center for Middle East Studies, October 3, Available at: <http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1571847>.

2. “Names of the Detained in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba,” *Washington Post*, Available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/guantanamo_names.html.

3. Omar Bakri, interview by the Center for Middle East Studies, October 3, Available at: <http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1571847>.

4. Ibid.

A Portrait of Uzbekistan’s Dissident Cleric In Exile: Obidhon Nazarov

Igor Rotar

Obidhon Nazarov, an Uzbek imam, was shot in front of his home in the Swedish town of Sundsvall on February 22. Since then, he has been in a coma. The gunman, who Swedish investigators identified as Yuriy Zhukovskiy, was arrested by the police in Russia. He reportedly had in his possession passports of the Russian Federation and Uzbekistan (Ferganews.com, October 17). The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) detained him at the request of their Swedish counterparts and Zhukovskiy’s extradition to Sweden is currently being arranged (*Expressen* [Stockholm], October 13).

A married Uzbek couple, Bahodir Pulatov and Nodira Aminova, were accused of aiding Zhukovskiy in the attempted assassination; however, there was not enough evidence to prove their guilt and the Uzbek couple was set free by a court in Stromsund (Ferganews.com, October 17).

Tulkin Karaev, an Uzbek journalist and refugee, told Jamestown from the Swedish city of Timro on December 11 that “most Uzbek refugees in Sweden are sure that Yuriy Jukovskiy, Bahodir Pulatov and Nodira Aminova were hired for this ‘job’ by the Uzbek intelligence service.” Karaev explained “Obidhon Nazarov is a very serious enemy of Uzbekistan’s President Islam Karimov...he does not have

enemies except for Uzbekistan’s authorities.” [1]

Nazarov, a famous imam and dissident from Uzbekistan, was born in 1958 in Namangan, a city in Uzbekistan’s part of the Ferghana Valley. Notably, Namangan is also the hometown of the leaders of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Tahir Yuldashev and Juma Namangani. From 1980 to 1984, Nazarov studied at the Islam Institute in Tashkent, which prepared imams. From 1985 to 1990, he was the imam of the Tilla Shaykh mosque in Tashkent and in 1990 he became imam of the Tukhtaboi mosque—the main mosque in Tashkent. [2]

Over one thousand Muslims used to meet in the 1990s in the Tukhtaboi mosque to listen to Nazarov’s preaching. Recordings of his sermons, which the authorities have outlawed, are still being distributed throughout Uzbekistan. [3]

Uzbekistan’s former chief mufti, Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf, generally considered to be independent of President Karimov, told Jamestown that Nazarov could be identified as “a typical representative of a new generation of Uzbekistan’s imams [who operate] independently of the authorities.” [4] Yusuf explained, “During the Soviet period, imams unquestioningly obeyed all orders of the communist authorities. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, most imams kept obeying the government of Uzbekistan, but some imams turned out to be independent of the official authorities. Obidkhon Nazarov was the most famous among the independent imams.”

According to Yusuf, Nazarov is one of the so-called “Wahhabis.” “Mr. Nazarov has very good connections with Saudi Arabian theologians; he regularly visited Saudi Arabia. He wants to spread the Saudi Arabian version of Islam, in spite of the fact that Uzbeks traditionally follow Sufi Islam; but it does not follow from this that he is a terrorist,” said Yusuf. [5]

The first “Wahhabis” appeared in Central Asia at the beginning of *perestroika*—the movement toward political reform of the Soviet Union and Communist Party, begun in the 1980s under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, Islamic preachers from Arab countries set off for the Soviet Union’s Muslim regions and provided young Muslims from Central Asian republics their first chance to study in religious schools in Muslim countries. [6]

Wahhabism strives for what it regards as an Islam purified of

later additions and innovations. It rejects the veneration of holy places and construction of expensive gravestones, seeing this as idolatry. Strictly speaking, the movement is linked to the Hanbali *madhhab* (school) of Sunni Islam, which has become the official faith of Saudi Arabia. However, it would be quite a stretch to say that the Central Asian “Wahhabis” are actually adherents of this current in Islam. Rather, the label “Wahhabi” is widely used as a term of abuse for devout Muslims in Central Asia. It is most often applied to anyone who criticizes the official clergy; but these “Wahhabist” individuals are not homogenous and they make up various groups of Muslims that generally differ significantly from each other.

“To be more accurate, the so-called ‘Wahhabis’ are Salafists [a collective term for Muslim religious leaders who, at various periods in history, have called on people to return to the faith and way of life of the early Muslim community] or fundamentalists,” Akbar Turadjonzoda, the *qadi* (Islamic judge) of Tajikistan and one of the leaders of Tajikistan’s opposition, told Jamestown in 1998. [7]

Nevertheless, while he was active, Nazarov has voiced views that are typical of the Hanbali *madhhab*. In 2006, Nazarov told Jamestown that he strongly opposed the veneration of holy places and favored a ban on music at weddings. He also expressed his belief that women should wear the *paranja* (a full-length robe designed to completely hide the outline of a woman’s body). Furthermore, Nazarov believes that Muslims should live in an Islamic (non-secular) state. [8]

In Sweden, Nazarov has taught refugees from Uzbekistan not to allow their children to attend music and physical education classes in school. He believes that Western music is sinful. Furthermore, according to Nazarov, Uzbek children—as Muslims—cannot attend physical education lessons in Sweden because students there wear shorts and t-shirts (Fergananeews.com, March 6).

Nazarov was forced to leave Uzbekistan to avoid arrest in 1998, after publicly criticizing the authorities’ decision to ban beards and the *hijab*. Authorities in Uzbekistan arrested several of his relatives and one of his sons disappeared without a trace. Nazarov himself was accused *in absentia* of undermining Uzbekistan’s constitutional order and was denounced as a leader of the country’s Wahhabis.

In exile in Sweden, Nazarov continued to criticize the Karimov regime. Additionally, Muslim Uzbeks from Europe as well as the United States regularly visited the imam. Each Saturday and Sunday began with a sermon in the community along with discussions on the political situation

and methods of political struggle against the regime in Uzbekistan (Fergananeews.com, October 17).

Nazarov maintains a website where he strongly criticizes Uzbekistan’s authorities. CDs featuring Imam Nazarov’s sermons, in which he preaches against the Karimov regime, are also illegally distributed in Uzbekistan. “Obviously Obidhon Nazarov is not just a religious activist, but a very influential politician. He is the political leader of all religious Uzbeks, and his elimination is very beneficial for the Karimov regime,” journalist Tulkin Karaev told Jamestown in October. [9]

Because Nazarov was born in Namangan and has a lot of relatives there, it is likely that he was familiar with some members of the IMU. Yet, according to Karaev, although Obidhon Nazarov never criticized the IMU, he has condemned any violent activity against the Karimov regime. So unlike the IMU, Nazarov unites Muslims who want to establish an Islamic state in Uzbekistan by peaceful methods. “There were two wings in the Uzbek Islamic opposition: a peaceful [wing], which was led by Imam Nazarov and the IMU, [which] fought against the regime with arms,” Karaev told Jamestown. [10] After the attempted elimination of Nazarov, and especially if he does not awake from his coma, many heretofore peaceful Islamists may now switch their support to the more extreme IMU.

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Notes

1. Tulkin Karaev, interview by author, Timro, Sweden, December 11.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf, interview by author, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, June 2006.
5. Ibid.
6. Igor Rotar, “Under the Green Banner: Islamic Radicals in Russia and the Former Soviet Union,” *Religion, State & Society* 30(2), June 2002.
6. Akbar Turadjonzoda, interview by author, 1998.
7. Obidhon Nazarov, phone interview by author, October 2006.
8. Tulkin Karaev, interview by author, Timro, Sweden, October 24.
9. Tulkin Karaev, interview by author, Timro, Sweden,

December 11.

The Public Face of MS-13: An In-Depth Look at Leader Borromeo Enrique Henríquez Solórzano

Dominic Kalms

On June 3, 1998, the Juzgado Primero de Instrucción, or First Court of Instruction, in the small Salvadoran municipality of Soyapango, convicted Borromeo Enrique Henríquez Solórzano to 30 years in prison for the double homicide of Roberto Carlos Hernandez and José Virgilio Gonzalez (*Diario Oficial*, October 3, 2005). At the time, officials in El Salvador only knew that Solórzano was a member of the feared Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13 gang, created on the streets of Los Angeles in the 1980s by Salvadoran immigrants fleeing the civil war in their country. While Solórzano has been languishing in prison for over a decade, he has risen to become the nominal leader of MS-13 and today the Salvadoran National Civilian Police (Policía Nacional Civil, PNC) publicly acknowledge that Solórzano sits atop the leadership of MS-13 and continues to make decisions on kidnappings, assassinations, extortions and large scale gang activity from his prison cell (El Faro.net [San Salvador], August 8). Though Solórzano has become the public face of MS-13, his power in this position is questionable given the complex structure of MS-13. Solórzano fervently denies that he is the gang's leader and has declared that he is merely been given his role by the media, but in reality he cannot make any decisions without "taking into account the voice of all his people..." (El Faro.net [San Salvador], October 8).

In 2012 the PNC published a graph entitled "National Ranfla MS13 Gang" that depicted the 45 leading members of the MS-13 who police classify as "the elite" (El Faro.net [San Salvador], August 8). [1] Borromeo Enrique Henríquez Solórzano, who authorities say also goes by the moniker "El Diablo," sits at the top of this graph. Alongside Solórzano is his longtime friend and gang member Ricardo Adalberto Díaz a.k.a. "The Rat" or "La Rata." Together these men are considered the "Jefes Nacionales" or "National Leaders" of MS-13.

Both Solórzano and Díaz joined MS-13 in Los Angeles as teenagers in the 1990s (El Faro.net [San Salvador], August

8). A few years later on July 20, 1997, Solórzano shot two victims to death in the Salvadoran city of Ilopango. The next year Solórzano was sentenced for 15 years for the murder of Roberto Carlos Hernandez and fifteen years for the murder of José Virgilio Gonzalez, plus an additional three years for illegally belonging to a gang (*Diario Oficial*, October 3, 2005). Considering that MS-13 was only established in El Salvador in 1992, it was clear that Solórzano and Díaz were some of the earliest members of the organization and were destined to become monumental figures in the group's future.

Proving his worth to the gang just one year after his 1999 imprisonment at the Quezaltepeque prison, Solórzano escaped by digging a tunnel out of the prison (El Diario de Hoy, October 10). He was able to remain free for one year under the alias Racson Mario Rivera (*La Prensa Grafica*, March 22). Eventually, however, Salvadoran authorities caught up with Rivera and he was put back in jail. Records obtained from his time at Quezaltepeque show that Solórzano was known for "obstructing the administrative work, especially programs for rehabilitation" and was "considered a threat to the physical integrity of the staff" (*La Prensa Grafica*, March 22). Eventually, after bouncing around to five other prisons, he was transferred in 2005 to the toughest maximum-security prison in El Salvador, the Zacatecoluca prison. Being transferred to Zacatecoluca was a promotion of sorts, as only the most dangerous gang members from MS-13 were transferred there.

Solórzano fit in well at Zacatecoluca and officially became part of the *ranfla*, or wheel, which is the top command of the MS-13 in El Salvador (El Faro.net [El Salvador], October 11). It was during this time that Solórzano became a *palabrero* ("those who have the word"), the gang leaders that control the smaller "cliques." Within the *ranfla*, Solórzano earned himself a unique reputation, becoming known as a man who has "an extraordinary way with words" who could "act as a facilitator" between the gang and authorities (El Faro.net [San Salvador], October 11). Due to his authoritative and articulate speaking style, the *ranfla* chose him to be their voice; he is typically the one who talks to the media and is the public face of the gang (El Faro.net [San Salvador], October 11).

During his time at Zacatecoluca, Solórzano continued to cultivate his reputation as a ruthless gang leader. Solórzano ordered the assassination of two MS-13 gang members, Jose Garcia Girls and Nixon Villatoro Edwin Bonilla, at the end of August for insubordination (elsalvador.com, August 22). The assassination of two high-ranking MS-13 members under Solórzano's authority demonstrates how ruthless he can be.

Fulfilling these dual roles of eloquent MS-13 spokesperson/articulate leader and brutal killer who operates in the trenches of day-to-day gang warfare created a unique role for Solórzano and he started to act as a liaison between the MS-13 leadership and the Salvadoran government. He earned the respect of the gang from his days as a violent murderer, yet his way with words and his ability to speak candidly also earned respect from the Salvadoran government. As a result, early this year, Solórzano presented the Salvadoran government with a document entitled “Proposed Resolution Framework for the Recovery of Social Peace in El Salvador” (ML News [Washington], July 23). The document set the stage for a set of formal negotiations to end the massive spike in violence that had resulted in 14 homicides a day in the Central American country. In the document, MS-13 leaders, led by Solórzano, stated that they would create a truce with their main rival, the Barrio 18, if the government eased certain restrictions on the gangs (ML News, July 23). Not only did Solórzano lead the negotiations with the Salvadoran government but he also spoke directly to Carlos Ernesto Mojica Lechuga, the longtime leader of Barrio 18 (El Nuevo Herald [Miami], July 12). Solórzano also insisted that Secretary General of the Organization of American States José Miguel Insulza and gang mediators Monsignor Fabio Colindres and Raul Mijango were present during the negotiations to ensure the process was equitable and transparent (*El-Nacional* [La Paz], July 13).

During the negotiations, Solórzano spoke passionately about MS-13’s willingness to end gang violence for the sake of El Salvador. He showed a genuine concern for his country and his countrymen. He also showed an in-depth understanding of politics, constitutional norms and civil liberties. During negotiations he told reporters that the prior administration in El Salvador, under the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) party, was unwilling to negotiate seriously. He was quoted as saying “we want a better life for our kids when we get out and so we went sincerely and we trusted them. We went as [humble] people but we didn’t realize until it was too late that we were meeting with political big shots [persons more concerned about their image and maintaining that image than a sincere interchange].” [2] He also cited the Salvadoran constitution as a guarantor of fundamental rights, telling a reporter that the constitution provides the right “to be comrades, to meet, to walk around and go wherever we want, without violence” (El Faro.net [San Salvador], October 11). Ultimately, through Solórzano’s artful negotiation, MS-13 won a major concession and on March 8, 30 leaders of MS-13, including Solórzano, were transferred from the maximum security prison at Zacatecoluca to the medium level facility known as the Ciudad Barrios prison, where

prisoners are able to receive visitors and have physical contact (Urgente24.com, March 24). Immediately after the transfer, MS-13 leaders issued orders from the prison to stop all killings and assassinations (El Faro.net [San Salvador], March 22). Homicides in El Salvador fell by 53% in the week after the transfers (5 per day) and several other gangs, including the Mara Machine, Crazy Look, Mao Mao, La Raza and Disorder Mara, joined the truce after witnessing its successes and seeing the leadership of Solórzano (Hispano.com, October 4).

While authorities wrestle to contain MS-13 in the Americas, what is clear is that while the gang may not have an official leadership, Solórzano is a leading member of the *ranfla* and he possesses significant authority in Central America’s criminal underworld. This may not translate into direct authority over all cliques in the United States but it is evident that Solórzano and his fellow inmates at Ciudad Barrios prison do control significant gang resources and continue to dictate gang actions throughout the region. Solórzano has proven that he has the capability, knowledge and support to negotiate with authorities, rival gangs and supranational organizations. Moving forward it is clear that he can be negotiated with on sensitive issues. In fact, in a recent interview with El Faro he was asked directly “Is Mara willing to disband?” to which responded, “We are ready to talk about anything that comes to the table” (El Faro.net [San Salvador], October 11).

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Notes

1. *Ranfla* refers to “a collective decision-making body” (El Faro.net [El Salvador], March 14).
2. Donna DeCesare, “Salvadoran Gangs: Brutal Legacies and a Desperate Hope,” North American Congress on Latin America, November 23, 2009, Available at: <https://nacla.org/node/6260>.