



# MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

## Personalities Behind the Insurgency

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#### LEADERS OF MOZAMBICAN MILITANT GROUP REVEALED

*Sunguta West*

Until recently, the top leadership of the rising Islamist Mozambican militant group, Ansar al-Sunna, had been a matter of speculation.

However, in mid-August, the country's police chief released several names of suspected Islamists who the country's security and intelligence agencies believe are ringleaders of the militant group. ([EWN](#), August 15, 2018)

According to the police, Abdul Faizal leads the group locally known as al-Shabaab, similar in name to the Somalia-based militant group. No clear connection exists between the two organizations. The details of the Mozambican al-Shabaab leader are scanty. Other leaders include Abdul Remane, Abdul Raim, Nuno Remane, Ibn Omar and Salimo Kijepel ([Club of Mozambique](#), August 13, 2018).

Since October 2017, attacks by the group have caused panic and fear in the northern province of Cabo Delgado, near the Tanzanian border. The province has been the focus of the global petroleum industry following the discovery of huge deposits of natural gas. Some multinational oil and gas companies like Italy's Eni Oil and the U.S. Company Anadarko, among others, are building facilities in the province ([AllAfrica.com](#) August 11, 2017).

Reports indicate that the group has killed an estimated 200 people. Villages, trading centers, churches and mosques have been targeted, and an estimated 400 homes have been torched. Most of the victims have been beheaded in hit-and-run raids, during which the militants also steal food supplies. ([cajnewsafrika](#) , July 23, 2018).

Like many of the Islamist militants groups in Africa, Ansar al-Sunna is seeking to establish an Islamic State in northern Mozambique.

Earlier reports quoting local Muslim leaders alleged that the group was led by a Gambian Muslim leader, or imam, named Musa. According to the leaders, Musa had aggressively recruited in Montepeuz District among populations with grievances against the security forces and an international mining company (African Center for Strategic Studies, March 28, 2018).

The other leader identified by the Muslim leaders was Nuro Adremane, who received training from al-Shabaab fighters after traveling to Mozambique through Tanzania and Kenya. Many other fighters are alleged to have trained in Somalia.

The group started as a religious organization, but it set up military camps in 2015. Its leaders are believed to have links with Islamist militant groups in Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and the Great Lakes Region. (Club of Mozambique, Jun 8, 2018). For some time, al-Shabaab, is believed to have sought to establish itself in the Great Lakes through its affiliate, the Allied F Democratic Front (ADF).

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## **Al-Tajouri, Al-Kani, Badi and Trabelsi: The Militia Leaders Fighting for Tripoli**

*Dario Cristiani*

On September 25, the Tripoli Security Directorate announced the end of fighting in the Libyan capital Tripoli (Libya Observer, Sept 26, 2018). This declaration comes after almost a month of fierce clashes that left around 117 people dead and 560 others wounded (Libya Observer, Sept 27, 2018). The conflict involved the Seventh Brigade from the town of Tarhouna and two of the most important Tripoli-based militias, the Tripoli Revolutionaries' Brigades (TBR) and the Nawasi.

The TBR, also known as the First Security Division of the Central General Security Administration (CGSA), is headed by Haithem al-Tajouri. Considered the most powerful militia leader in Tripoli, he had to return from his Hijra in Saudi Arabia due to the fighting (The National, August 29). The TBR headquarters is located in al-Shat, in the area of Abu Sittah, near the Tripoli Corniche. Al-Tajouri is not known for having any particular ideological orientation. Over the past few years, the group has strengthened its presence throughout the entire city and has gained significant control of its economy. For instance, the CGSA gave al-Tajouri the mandate to protect the port of Tripoli in February 2017, which is an essential asset for business in Tripoli and Libya. The group also maintains significant control over the branches of local banks and the financial operators in Tripoli (Middle East Eye, April 10,

2017). The Nawasi Brigade, also known as the Eighth Brigade, is run by members of the Qaddur family and has a more Islamist outlook. Strongly opposed to the radical version of the Salafism of the Islamic State (IS), on the one hand, and Khalifa Haftar, the leader of the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA), on the other, they maintain a significant presence in Northern and Western areas of Tripoli.

The Seventh Brigade is also known as the Kanyat or the Kani Brigade, as the al-Kani family heads it. The eldest of the four al-Kani brothers, Mohammed al-Kani, is the formal leader. The Kanyat became part of the forces associated with the Government of National Accord (GNA), the United Nations-backed government of Libya, in 2017. Interestingly enough, the Kanyat has often worked together with the TBR and the other Tripoli militias. For instance, back in October 2017, the Kanyat backed the TBR and the Misratan forces of the Halbous's 301 Brigade in a military operation in the areas of Qasir Ben Ghashir, Sayah and Wadi Rabe. This action was aimed at eliminating an armed group loyal to former Libyan dictator Qaddafi, led by Salah Al-Marghani and Mabrouk Qaddafi. ([Libya Observer](#), Oct 4, 2017). The Kanyat justified its actions by proclaiming its ambition of freeing Tripoli and its people from gangs looting public money in the city ([Al-Arabiya](#), Sept 3, 2018).

However, the recent eruption of violence pitting this militia against the TBR and the NB is not the symptom of a new, widening conflict in Tripoli, or of the new importance of local militias in running Tripoli's affairs. Since the establishment of the GNA, Tripoli's militias have

progressively and steadily increased their influence, becoming the actual kingmakers of the city. As such, it is not uncommon—and will happen again—that militias formally belonging to the same alliance can clash suddenly, in many cases over local and material issues. The rising tension between the Tarhouna-based Seventh Brigade and the TBR and the NB created the opportunity for the many rivals of Sarraj and the Tripoli militias to try exploiting the situation. Salah Badi and Khalifa Haftar are prime examples of this.

Allegedly, Badi's forces provided most of the weaponry used by the Seventh Brigade in their bid to enter Tripoli. The al-Kani decision to strike an alliance with Badi brought the GNA to dismiss the Seventh Brigade from its forces. Badi is the leader of the Jabhat al-Samud (the Steadfastness Front), initially also known as the Libya Dawn Mark-2. The Misratan Badi is one of the closest militia leaders to Khalifa Ghwell, the Prime Minister of the Libyan National Salvation Government. Badi is a former officer of Qaddafi's army but was later imprisoned as a dissident. He then led Misrata militias in the victory against loyalist forces and was elected to the General National Congress in the July 2012 elections, but resigned in 2014. He has been a fierce enemy of Sarraj since his appointment, often claiming that his major and final ambition was to kick Sarraj and the GNA out of Tripoli ([Afrigate News](#), Feb 21, 2017).

Badi's support for the Kanyat is a further demonstration that groups in Misrata remain divided. Some of the militias support Sarraj, some others work directly with Tripoli's militias, while some want to return to Tripoli to

fight against the militias currently in charge of the city.

In the wake of this eruption of violence, Haftar announced that forces belonging to his LNA were not involved in the clashes and threatened—once again—to enter Tripoli to enforce security. However, despite his rhetoric as possible “National Savior,” the role of Haftar remains geographically limited. He still has the ambition of becoming more relevant in Tripoli and the west of Libya, but this ambition clashes with the reality on the ground. His strategy of penetrating the south of Libya, and from there moving to Tripoli, suffered a significant blow in May 2017 when Haftar lost 141 soldiers in an ambush at the Brak al-Shatt airbase (see [TM](#), June 2, 2017; [Libya Herald](#), May 18, 2017; [Al-Jazeera](#), May 20, 2017). Since then, his role has remained limited to dominating the east of the country and the Sirte Basin, the so-called Oil Crescent, but with a rather limited national political autonomy, as exemplified by the failure to sell oil through the eastern NOC after Haftar regained control of two oil terminals ([Libya Observer](#), July 11, 2018). The appointment of Emad Trabelsi, leader of al-Sawaiq brigade and considered close to Haftar, as chief of the General Security Service in Tripoli did not change the actual balance of power in the city ([Libya Observer](#), July 9, 2018). Interestingly, on social media, Haftar's loyalists have supported the Kani/Badi operation, despite the historical – and profound - rivalry existing between Badi and Haftar. Badi was among the most important supporters of the Political Isolation law, one of the triggers of the civil war in 2014 and a law which Haftar

staunchly opposes. Badi himself remains one of the fiercest enemies of Haftar.

The latest eruption of violence in Tripoli represents nothing new. Although the numbers of casualties is particularly significant, the sudden outbreak of clashes between militias is a common feature of the Tripoli's security environment since 2014. Since 2016, the enlargement of a group of local militias' territory has often triggered the reaction of other groups who feel excluded or who want to return to Tripoli. Against this volatile background, the militias' leaders have a fundamental role, as no effective, superior authority can bind them together. They enjoy significant freedom of action. As such, their will is often decisive in shaping the security dynamics on the ground, and they will remain a significant variable in defying the future of Libya.

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## The Mystery Emir: Who is IS-K Commander Shaikh Aslam Farooqi?

*Farhan Zahid*

The sudden rise of Islamic State's Khurasan Chapter (IS-K, or Waliyat-e-Khurasan) in September 2014 took the security policymakers of Pakistan and Afghanistan by surprise. The global Islamist terrorist organization was able to find immediate support from local and regional Islamist terrorist groups operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. A number of terrorist organizations either pledged allegiance to IS or developed a working relationship for the purpose of perpetrating terrorist attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan. [1]

The group's momentum did not last long, as U.S. and Afghan forces carried out consecutive counter-terrorist operations, drone strikes, and aerial bombings (including the dropping of a MOAB in Nangarhar) to decapitate IS-K's leadership. Over the course of two years, the terrorist entity has lost three of its emirs. This reversal of momentum has hurt the growth of IS-K in the region ([CNN Asia, July 14, 2018](#)). The organization, however, still has tremendous potential to expand because of a rich jihadist landscape in Pakistan.

By mid-2017, a faction of IS-K fighters emerged under the command of Shaikh Aslam Farooqi in eastern Afghan provinces. The rise of Sheikh Aslam Farooqi as the new Emir of IS-K (Farooqi Faction) has created a stabilizing factor for the organization. He has not only managed to plan and execute a number of terrorist operations

against Afghan and U.S. forces, but has also spread the IS-K's network in Pakistan. Farooqi has also been able to remain hidden from American and Afghan intelligence, and thus been able to avoid the fate of his predecessors.

It is therefore pertinent to analyze and assess his background and modus operandi.

### Who is Farooqi?

Islamic State established its Khurasan chapter with fanfare in 2014, but nominated emirs were targeted and killed by US and Afghan forces. Farooqi was selected by IS-Central after the consecutive deaths of Hafiz Saeed Khan Orakzai in July 2016, Abdul Haseeb Logari in April 2017 and Abdul Sayed Bajuari in July 2017 ([India Today, July 15, 2017](#))

Little is known about Aslam Farooqi. Even today, he remains a shadowy figure with much of his background information remaining unknown. However, according to information that has come to light, Farooqi hails from Sheikhpura district of Punjab province. Later, he studied at a madrasah in Karachi. [2]

Crucially, Farooqi was recruited and trained in the 1990s by Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). The group is a Pakistan-based Islamist terrorist organization that has been involved in a number of international terrorist attacks and plots. [3] Most notable among these is the 2008 Mumbai attacks, which resulted in the deaths of 164 people consisting of 26 nationalities. ([CNN Asia, Dec 12, 2017](#))

The LeT background of Farooqi is a cause for concern. LeT militants are known for their hardcore Salafi-jihadist views and the extensive

training they receive. [4] The group is also considered close to the Pakistani military establishment though it is banned in Pakistan by the Ministry of Interior.

Farooqi served as a low-level commander of LeT but he did not manage to rise further. LeT is overwhelmingly comprised of ethnic Punjabis of the Salafist school of thought from the Pakistani Punjab province.

Farooqi's change in allegiance to IS-K is not terribly surprising. Both IS-K and LeT subscribe to the same Salafist ideology and share similar anti-Western views—on the caliphate, the Shia and Sufi sects, and the status of women and minorities. It is also apparent from recent developments that scores of LeT militants have joined the ranks of the IS-K in south-eastern Afghanistan. At least 70 bodies of militants killed in the clashes in Ghazni City in August 2018 were later identified as Pakistani ([VOA, Aug 16, 2018](#)).

Farooqi commands a force of 3,000-5,000 Pashtun and Pakistani fighters who are based in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan ([Diplomat, Apr 3, 2018](#)). Farooqi's area of operations in Afghanistan include: Nangarhar, Logar, Paktia, Paktika, Kapisa, Parwan, Laghman, Kunar, Nuristan, Ghazni and Zabul. A number of local Afghan Islamist terrorist groups, such as Afghan Khilafat and Tehreek-e-Khilafat Khurasan, have merged with IS-K under Farooqi. The Pakistani component of Tehreek-e-Khilafat was the first to pledge allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014 and currently its fighters are alongside Farooqi. [5]

## **Tactics and Plan of Action**

According to Afghan expert Antonio Giustozzi, Farooqi has taken measures to improve relations with Pakistani authorities and groups. IS-Central has expressed displeasure with these dealings. Despite such reports, Farooqi has extended the IS-K network to the Pakistani cities of Peshawar, Hungu, Swat, Karachi, North and South Waziristan, and Momand. IS-K is also concentrated in the tribal districts of Orakzai, Bajuar, and Kurram. [6]

From recent terrorist strikes in Afghan cities, it seems evident that under Farooqi the IS-K has become a potent force. Farooqi planned and dispatched a number of suicide bombers to Afghan urban centers. Terrorist attacks he orchestrated have resulted in massive casualties and destruction of property. It is also apparent from the trend of terrorist strikes that Farooqi has plans to target certain areas and not the whole of Afghanistan.

Seemingly the emir has reached a truce with the Afghan Taliban at different levels. Previous emirs of IS-K had simultaneously fought the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan security forces. Farooqi, however, seems to be playing differently in a theater of war heavily dominated by the Afghan Taliban. His plan of action is to fight Afghan security forces and hit soft targets in Afghan cities, while adopting a conciliatory approach toward the Afghan Taliban. This is evident from instructions given by the Afghan Taliban Emir Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada. The Taliban emir directed his fighters to stop fighting against IS-K militants in eastern Afghanistan ([Express Tribune, Oct 8, 2017](#)).

It has also been reported that Farooqi signed peace agreements with Afghan Taliban commanders on a province-to-province basis. This diplomacy maintains IS-K's territorial gains and the ability of the group to collect taxes by extortion and other means. This policy measure has ended years of brutal warfare between the Afghan Taliban and IS-K fighters—at least in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan where IS-K has strongholds. The Taliban forces have continued fighting another faction of IS-K led by the Uzbek militant Mauvia Uzbekistani in the northern provinces of Afghanistan.

With this strategic calculus Farooqi has not only managed to reduce the number of enemies IS-K has faced in the past, but has also curtailed the organization's losses and consolidated its gains.

According to some estimates, in 2016 the Khurasan Chapter of IS raised \$271 million through a combination of private donations, Arab donors, and support sent from Syria and Iraq. Farooqi recruits through sources in Pakistan, which also allows him to access money. The emir also uses training facilities near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border (Diplomat April 3, 2018).

## Conclusion

The lack of adequate information makes it difficult to project the magnitude of Farooqi's might in eastern Afghan provinces, but it is apparent that he will be able to create security hazards for Afghan urban centers in the near future. He has been able to tactically strengthen his command structure and managed to recruit and swell IS-K ranks in Afghanistan. He has turned out to be a difficult target for both

Afghan and U.S. forces. Afghan policymakers need to gather more information about his whereabouts and establish some level of liaison with their Pakistani counterparts in order to root out the IS-K network. IS-K is in Pakistan's backyard, making the situation equally dangerous for the country.

## Notes

[1] Tehreek-e-Khilafat Pakistan, Jundullah, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (Shahidullah Faction) in Pakistan and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), factions of Afghan Taliban and Uighur and Chechen Islamists operating in the region.

[2] Discussions with a security expert in Islamabad on Aug 28, 2018.

[3] Discussions with an Islamabad based journalist on August 20, 2018

[4] Daura-e-Aam, a 21-day course for indoctrination of recruits, who then receive Daura-e-Khaas, hardcore terrorist training, in camps. LeT also runs specialized programs, such as counter-intelligence, explosives, assassinations, kidnappings and sabotage.

[5] Antonio Giustozzi, "Taliban and Islamic State: Enemies or Brothers in Jihad?", Center for Research and Policy Analysis, December 15, 2017, <https://www.crpaweb.org/single-post/2017/12/15/Enemies-or-Jihad-Brothers-Relations-Between-Taliban-and-Islamic-State>

[6] Ibid

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## **Boko Haram to Ansaru to ISWAP: A Post-Mortem Analysis of Abu Fatima**

*Jacob Zenn*

The jihadist group Anṣar al-Muṣlimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru) broke away from Boko Haram in a formal announcement through fliers dropped in Kano, Nigeria in January 2012 ([Vanguard, February 1, 2012](#)). However, Ansaru's founder, the long-time Nigerian al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) kidnapper, Khalid al-Barnawi, had by mid-2011 already written letters to AQIM leadership complaining about Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau's excessive takfirism (excommunication of Muslims) ([Jihadology.net, April 28](#)). According to al-Barnawi, Abubakar Shekau had engaged in takfir to such an extent that al-Barnawi and his shura had no choice but to split from him. After Shekau rebuffed advice from AQIM to change his ways, AQIM advised Khalid al-Barnawi to form Ansaru as a separate group from Boko Haram ([Al-Risalah, January 2017](#)). Among the key Boko Haram members to defect and join Ansaru at that time was Abu Fatima.

This article discusses three stages in Abu Fatima's jihadist career and his transition from Boko Haram to Ansaru and back to Boko Haram before finally joining the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) before his death in Yobe State in 2017 ([Punchng.com, July 6, 2017](#)).

### **First Stage: Early Action in Boko Haram**

Abu Fatima's first reported activity as a Boko Haram member was after the July 2009 clashes that led to the death of the group's then leader and co-founder, Muhammed Yusuf. At that time, according to Yusuf's son, Abu Fatima gave a speech to Yusuf's followers "to not despair" and was named the group's "general commander" ([aymennjawad.org](http://aymennjawad.org), August 5, 2016). It was also after Yusuf's death that Shekau became the group's leader, a position he held with undisputed authority until Abu Fatima would finally partake in deposing him seven years later in 2016. Yusuf's son, Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi, would then become leader after Shekau was deposed.

After July 2009, Abu Fatima resurfaced again on the day after Boko Haram's first ever suicide bombing—and the first suicide bombing in Nigerian history—at the Federal Police headquarters in Abuja on June 16, 2011. At that time, Abu Fatima issued a written statement to the media claiming:

Of recent, Hafiz Ringim [the then commissioner of police] has been going places and making unguarded utterances to the effect that he will crush us in a number of days. We attacked his base in order to show him that actions speak louder than words ([Daily Trust](http://DailyTrust.com), June 18, 2011).

That suicide bombing at the Federal Police headquarters was also forewarned one day before the attack by a Boko Haram member in a statement to the media:

Very soon, we will wage jihad....We want to make it known that our jihadists have arrived in Nigeria from Somalia where they received real training on warfare from our brethren who made that country ungovernable ([AFP](http://AFP.com), June 15, 2011).

Indeed, this warning about members arriving from Somalia proved to be no bluff. A group of Boko Haram members had indeed returned to Nigeria from Somalia in March 2011 under the leadership of Mamman Nur ([Crisis Group](http://CrisisGroup.org), 2014). Nur had also opposed Shekau ever since the July 2009 clashes but did not go so far as to defect from Boko Haram, as Ansaru members did in January 2012. Nur was also involved in the second suicide bombing in Nigeria's history, which targeted the UN Headquarters building in Abuja in August 2011 and killed 23 people ([Vanguard.com](http://Vanguard.com), September 4, 2011).

This first stint of Abu Fatima's career in Boko Haram suggests that even before July 2009, he must have had an important role in the group. His background before then is not well-known. No detailed eulogy about him has been written. He nevertheless could not have become "general commander" after July 2009 if not for his accomplishments before then. It can also be assumed that as "general commander" one of his key attacks was the Federal Police headquarters suicide bombing in June 2011. This would also explain why he claimed that attack.

### **Second Stage: From Ansaru Commander to Re-integration with Boko Haram**

Abu Fatima resurfaced again in June 2012 when Ansaru issued two videos—in Arabic and in English—to explain to its audiences that it was breaking from Shekau because of his excessive violence against Muslims. At this time a Kaduna-based newspaper which had contacts with Boko Haram and the newly-formed Ansaru interviewed Abu Fatima, who was described as Ansaru’s “commander of suicide bombings” (Desert Herald, June 2, 2012). While this position was consistent with his role in the Federal Police headquarters suicide bombing, it also indicated he had obviously defected to Ansaru. According to the interview, Abu Fatima nevertheless believed it was still possible Ansaru might be able to work with Boko Haram in the future if the two groups could overcome ideological differences.

Less than one year after being interviewed as an Ansaru member, in March 2013, Abu Fatima appeared in a Boko Haram video leading a march of fighters in training (Vanguard, March 20, 2013). [1] This indicated he had followed through with his suggestion in the interview that Ansaru could “work with” Boko Haram and accordingly reintegrated with Boko Haram under Shekau’s leadership. One of the notable changes in Boko Haram after the reintegration of Abu Fatima and other Ansaru members to Boko Haram in March 2013 was that Boko Haram’s capabilities rapidly surged and began to resemble Ansaru tactics. This included Boko Haram commencing operations to kidnap foreigners for ransom in Cameroon, which had been Ansaru’s specialized tactic in Nigeria prior to March 2013; raids on military barracks; media quality improvement and adoption of

Ansaru narratives; and a massive increase in suicide bombings, which was, of course, Abu Fatima’s expertise in Ansaru (Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, March 13).

In addition to Abu Fatima, Khalid al-Barnawi, who had been an expert kidnapper with AQIM before founding Ansaru, contributed to the surge in Boko Haram capabilities. Among the fruits of Boko Haram’s tactical improvement was that by 2014 Boko Haram had conquered territory nearly the size of the U.S. state of Maryland in northeastern Nigeria, in which Shekau declared an “Islamic State” (Sahara Reporters, August 24, 2014). Although it may seem counterintuitive that Ansaru members would reintegrate with Boko Haram, its members had little choice: Shekau had been killing off other Ansaru leaders, which meant their lives would continue to be under threat unless they submitted to Shekau as leader (@A salkida, November 1, 2014). In the end, the hard-core Ansaru ideologues who opposed Shekau remained in Ansaru, but the key operational Ansaru members like Abu Fatima reintegrated, leaving Ansaru as a shell of its former self.

### **Third Stage: Joining ISWAP and Deposing Shekau**

Abu Fatima and other Ansaru members’ initial instincts about Boko Haram would prove correct. Even after they reintegrated with Boko Haram, Shekau continued the same excessive application of takfir as he did before they formed Ansaru back in 2011. This alienated the population in the territories Boko Haram controlled. The former Ansaru members, including Abu Fatima, therefore desired to

depose Shekau from the leadership of the group. A key turning point was when Abubakar al-Baghdadi declared the Caliphate in 2014 and the former Ansaru members saw this as an opportunity to compel Shekau to make the pledge. Although Shekau recognized al-Baghdadi's legitimacy, he did not want to make the pledge so as to avoid becoming subordinate to Islamic State. Nevertheless, Shekau faced so much pressure from sub-commanders to make the pledge that he finally did in March 2015 ([Jihadology.net](http://Jihadology.net), [March 7, 2015](http://March 7, 2015)). This is when Boko Haram rebranded as Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP).

Sometime between May and August 2016 Abu Fatima and Mamman Nur also recorded an audio sermon to other ISWAP commanders detailing all of the ways Shekau was engaging in excessive takfir and even disobeying orders from Islamic State, including on kidnapping women. Abu Fatima, for example, stated:

We have reported you to the caliph, Mallam Abubakar Shekau. Brothers! You should know that we have reported Mallam Abubakar Shekau to the Caliph of the Muslims, and what we did is in accordance with the religion. You have invented a new creed.... This leader of ours is acting incomprehensibly, so we have reported him. Therefore, you should understand that we do not intend to kindle sedition ([Sahara Reporters](http://Sahara Reporters), [August 5, 2016](http://August 5, 2016)).

In addition to these grievances, Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi had written eight letters to Islamic State about Shekau, after which Islamic State's more moderate "Bin Ali" theological faction agreed to announce Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi as the new ISWAP leader and to drop Shekau from the role on August 2, 2016 ([al-Naba](http://al-Naba), [August 2, 2016](http://August 2, 2016)). According to the book written by Abu Musab al-Barnawi in 2018, events transpired as follows:

We committed the lesser of two evils, as we mobilized to deter [Shekau] from his transgression, so we arose to connect secretly with noble commanders, among them the peerless commander Abu Fatima (may God accept him), amir of the al-Faruq region, who was the other to be greatly irritated by Shekau, so we gave pledges and promises to each other to remove oppression from the brothers and address the grievances of their people, so we disavowed Shekau and raised our matter to the abode of the Caliphate, and after being informed of the situation and reviewing our circumstances, and discussing the matter from their side, they removed Shekau from the wilaya and appointed in his place Sheikh Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi ([aymennjawad.org](http://aymennjawad.org), [August 5, 2016](http://August 5, 2016)).

A subsequent ISWAP video in June 2018 also noted that Abu Fatima, in fact, led the on-the-ground battle against Shekau loyalists in August 2016 on behalf of Abu Musab al-Barnawi

loyalists, who was now the Islamic State-recognized leader of ISWAP. Due to Abu Fatima's victories, Shekau was forcibly dethroned from leadership ([jihadology.net](http://jihadology.net), August 11). The ISWAP video also referred to Abu Fatima as "Abu Fatima al-Lagossi," suggesting Abu Fatima was from or had family origins in Lagos, southern Nigeria. Other than that, little is known about his life prior to being a militant. But the video confirmed what had been reported in Nigerian media in 2017: Abu Fatima was killed in a separate battle with Nigerian security forces in Yobe State that year. According to the ISWAP video, "Abu Fatima was among the heroes of Islam, who sacrificed for Islam while those who called themselves Muslims were undermining Islam [Shekau loyalists]." In addition, the video noted Abu Fatima:

...was one of the commanders of this Wilayah [Islamic State]. He dedicated his life and wealth towards uplifting Islam, and freeing Muslims from worshipping Westerners (western culture)... He was feeding death to Shekau's Khawarij... His death is a challenge and sad incident for us, but a blessing (illuminating) for him.

### **Significance of Abu Fatima**

The case of Abu Fatima shows the fluidity of the factional relationships in Boko Haram. He was in Boko Haram, then Ansaru, then Boko Haram, and finally ISWAP where he deposed Abubakar Shekau from the ISWAP leadership. His was also among the more sophisticated commanders both

in suicide bombings and land battles, as evidenced by his victories against the Shekau faction. Though he is now dead, he left an indelible legacy on ISWAP and is therefore one of the few commanders the group has ever eulogized.

### **Notes**

[1] The author has obtained a copy of still images of the version of the video in which Abu Fatima appears leading the march.

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## From the Inner Circle of Ahmed al-Chalabi's INC to America's New Specially Designated Terrorist—A Profile of Iraqi Banker Aras Habib

*Rafid Jaboori*

On May 15, the U.S. Treasury Department put the Iraqi banker, businessman, and politician Aras Habib on the list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists for his role in assisting and providing financial support and other services to Iran Republican Guard Corps's Al-Quds Force (IRGC-QF). He was accused of enabling Iran to exploit Iraq's banking system to move funds from Tehran to the Lebanese Shia group Hezbollah. Habib is the chairman and chief executive of al-Bilad Islamic Bank, which is based in Baghdad. The bank itself was also designated for being owned or controlled by Habib ([U.S. Treasury Department Press Release](#), May 15).

The announcement came ironically a few days after Habib won a seat in the Iraqi Parliament for the party led by the U.S.-backed Iraqi prime minister, Haider al-Abadi. Habib was defiant in condemning his designation as a terrorist. As the Iraqi government moved to crack down on the al-Bilad bank's activities, Habib was elected to parliament ([Kurdistan 24](#), May 16).

Habib is the former right-hand man of one of the most controversial figures in the old anti-Saddam Hussein opposition, Ahmed al-Chalabi. Habib succeeded Chalabi as head of the Iraqi National Congress party (INC) after his death in November 2015. The story of Aras Habib

reflects the sophistication of Iranian influence in Iraq. The Islamic Republic does not only project influence through its longstanding alliance with the Iraqi Shia Islamist parties, but also through secular and socially liberal parties like Chalabi and Habib's INC.

### **Life in the Shadows**

Aras Habib Mohammed Kareem al-Fayli was born in Baghdad in the late 1960s to a Shia Kurd family. [1] His father Habib Kareem was a senior member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which is led by the Barzani family. [2]

In the 1990s, Habib became close to Ahmad al-Chalabi. They met in the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq, which had emerged as an autonomous region after the Gulf War in 1991. Chalabi was coming from Iran to hold meetings with the Kurdish leadership. Aras's father assigned him to meet and greet Chalabi by the border crossing of Haj Imran and accompany him during his stay in Kurdistan. On that day, Habib joined Chalabi's group and the two men worked closely together until Chalabi's death. Habib continued to remain active within the ranks of the INC through the 1990s and early 2000s. He was Chalabi's right-hand man and head of operations of the INC. [3]

### **Chalabi's Number 2**

Unlike Chalabi—who played a prominent, public role as an opposition figure throughout the 1990s and early 2000s—Habib kept a low profile. Over the years he ran several secret operations and used various aliases, none of which were against U.S. interests. In fact, the

INC worked closely with U.S. intelligence agencies against the Saddam Hussein regime. The INC's involvement in feeding false information to the administration of former President George W. Bush in the buildup to the Iraq war has been well covered. One of the leaders of the INC explained in later years that the INC had a program to collect information for the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). The program and the relationship between the INC and the Bush Administration collapsed in 2004, however, over the conclusion that Saddam Hussein's regime did not actually have any weapons of mass destruction before the invasion. [4]

Habib was at the heart of many of these controversial operations that aimed to convince the United States that Hussein's regime had WMDs. He orchestrated several operations that presented the media and Western intelligence with people who claimed they had defected from the Saddam Hussein regime and had knowledge that the Iraqi ruler possessed WMDs. Habib also was suspected of having strong links to Iranian intelligence since the 1990s. [5]

The INC was well positioned immediately after the fall of Baghdad because of its ties to the Bush Administration and the U.S. Department of Defense in particular. Chalabi took over the Hunting Club, a luxurious social club in the affluent neighborhood of al-Mansoor in western Baghdad and made it his headquarters. Habib and his militia secured the place and made it their command center.

The INC became more infamous after its involvement in misleading the U.S. and Western

intelligence services about Saddam Hussein's alleged WMDs. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the INC became involved in two other very controversial policies. First, the disbanding of the Iraqi Army and banning of the Baath Party, which ruled Iraq from 1968 to 2003. Secondly, Habib was accused of leading death squads that targeted civilians and political rivals.

These human rights violations were exposed when the United States fell out with Chalabi and stormed the INC offices in Baghdad in 2004. Habib fled to Iran and stayed there for more than a year. He was accused of being an Iranian intelligence double agent against the United States. After returning to Iraq, he had to flee to Iran again in 2008 following another U.S. crackdown. He eventually returned to Iraq in 2011, after the withdrawal of U.S. forces.

Habib denies his involvement in human rights violations and other accusations regarding the period that followed the invasion. Instead, he claims that the U.S. authorities in Iraq had set him up as part of a policy change that prolonged the U.S. occupation. This is despite an alleged agreement with the Iraqi opposition to form an Iraqi government right after the fall of the regime [6]

### **Banking System**

The banking system in Iraq is very prone to various types of abuse and exploitation. Dozens of private banks were established after the 2003 invasion. With an economy that is dependent on oil revenue and a political structure that suffers from violence and instability, the Iraqi banking sector is dominated by influential political factions. In this environment, people saw no

controversy in having a politician like Habib become the chairman of al-Bilad ([alkhaleejonline.net](http://alkhaleejonline.net), May 14).

Neither government-owned banks nor private banks are able to provide services like facilitating the payment of salaries of the large number of public-sector employees or enabling citizens to regularly pay their bills to basic service providers. [7] Yet, private banks are in the very privileged position of having direct access to hard currency, primarily U.S. dollars, from the Iraqi Central Bank (ICB).

The ICB pumps millions of U.S. dollars into the market every day. Although the process is called “Hard Currency Auction,” its main purpose is to keep the value of the Iraqi currency artificially high by constantly feeding the market with American currency. Habib’s al-Bilad bank is among those privileged banks authorized to buy U.S. dollars directly from the ICB, paying for it in Iraqi currency (*Al-Mada* June 22, 2015).

Under former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a staunch ally of Iran, Iraq became an important part of Iran’s strategy to resist U.S. sanctions when they were first imposed in 2012. The important role Habib and his bank played allowed him to avoid getting caught up in the rivalry forming between his mentor Chalabi and Maliki. His work had become more specific and focused on financial affairs, while his ties to Iran allowed him to operate his bank freely despite Maliki’s anger toward his boss ([kitababt.com](http://kitababt.com), February 19).

Recent years have witnessed more field involvement of the IRGC-QF in Iraq, requiring INC and Habib’s assistance. Al-Bilad bank

opened a branch in Beirut, apparently to facilitate its role in supporting IRGC-QF and Hezbollah activities. As part of Habib’s operation in Lebanon, the INC also established an Iraqi affairs-focused satellite channel in Beirut (*Al-Arabiya*, August 11). Asia TV was the mouthpiece of the INC and Habib (*Al-Akbhar*, November 18, 2011).

Despite his controversial background and record, which was well known to the U.S. intelligence agencies, Habib became an electoral ally of Haider al-Abadi, the U.S.-backed prime minister who succeeded Maliki. Habib secured a place among the top five candidates in the province of Baghdad and is now a member of parliament. With the lack of a whipping system and shifting loyalties, Habib is under no obligation to support Abadi in the new parliament. In fact, as Abadi seemed to have been getting his head around Habib’s designation, Habib received direct backing from the biggest pro-Iran faction in the new parliament (*Ayn al Iraq News* May 16).

### **Relaunching With a New Strategy**

Chalabi died on November 3, 2015 at the age of 71. Habib succeeded him without dispute. The INC was a small group that was centered on Chalabi and his influential connections. According to an interview with Habib on the Iraqi TV channel Dijla, he made it his initiative to build a political party instead. [8]

Habib is likely to keep enjoying the support of the pro-Iran faction in parliament, al-Bina’a. Like the strategy that the INC pursued under Chalabi, however, Habib might not need to join that faction officially. He now promotes a self-professed liberal brand for his party aimed to

attract parts of the Iraqi Shia constituency that grew so frustrated with Iran-linked Shia Islamist parties. The youth and women are at the heart of Habib's political strategy. He has been increasingly sponsoring sporting events. He has also been meeting and promising support for artists ([Asiasat.tv](#), October 5, 2017).

Even before relaunching the INC, Habib has never presented himself as a pious Muslim who observed Islamic rules. The fact that he decided to establish al-Bilad as an Islamic Bank, which does not charge or pay interest as this is not allowed according to Islamic laws, is quite telling. It could well be because al-Bilad Bank was involved in activities that were in line with Iran and Hezbollah's Islamic commitments.

Habib's strategy focuses on identity politics. In addition to promoting secular-liberal lines for the INC, Habib seems to realize that identity politics is still dominant in Iraq. He accordingly includes an identity politics dimension in his strategy. Habib presents his Fayli (Shia Kurd) affiliation consistently and publicly. Some estimates indicate that there are a million Faylis, in Baghdad, Diyala and Wasit provinces. Historically, Faylis were attracted by the appeal of the Kurdistan-based Kurdish nationalist parties, although they were Sunni dominated. Many Faylis also joined the Iraqi communist party. After the 2003 invasion, they came significantly under the influence of the Shia Islamist parties and became part of their base of support ([Asia TV](#), March 31).

As the appeal of Iraqi Shia Islamist parties is waning, Habib is choosing the right moment to build his own base. With patronage and

clientelism being the main features of the relationships between political parties and their supporters, much of Habib's success will depend on his influence in the new government. With the support he received from Iran and the pro-Iran faction in the Iraqi parliament, his historical strong ties with Kurdish parties, and his newly polished liberal secular rhetoric, Habib appears to be in a good position.

After his terrorist designation, it is unlikely that he will be a member of the next prime minister's cabinet, for fear of angering the U.S. Yet the new prime minister will also need to assure Iran that he will not be its enemy. Abadi's measures against Habib's bank were not trumpeted publicly, nor did Abadi exclude Habib or denounce him. Even if he does not come from the pro-Iran faction, the new PM will need to give attention to the significant number of Iranian allies in the parliament ([Alghad Press](#), May 17).

After his designation by the Treasury Department, Habib has reorganized his activities. His position in the business community and politics has not been affected. In parliament, he has gained even more tools to exert influence. Even in the past parliament, the Iran-backed faction were proven so powerful and managed to bring down charismatic members of the cabinet. There are reports that Habib actually had extended his influence to members of parliament from other parties by financing their campaigns. [9] Habib's bank is now under more scrutiny from the Iraqi government than ever but he himself will likely retain a strong influence on Iraqi politics.

**Notes**

[1] The majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslim and they are concentrated in the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq. Shia Kurds, known also as Faylis, are a minority among Iraqi Kurds. They are concentrated in Baghdad and other parts of central and southern Iraq, especially along the border with Iran. While the two major dialects of the Kurdish language spoken in Iraqi Kurdistan have the characteristics of a language developed from its Farsi origin, Faylis speak a dialect that is closer to the Luri language spoken in western Iran.

[2] Despite the fact that the KDP had been leading an insurrection against Saddam Hussein's government, and that Faylis (Shia Kurds) were persecuted and were perceived by Saddam's regime as possible collaborators with Iran, Habib lived and received a good education in Baghdad. He claims that he graduated as an engineer from the University of Baghdad, the same department that Saddam Hussein's eldest son Uday graduated from. Habib has never provided explanation to that early period of his life.

[3] Interview with Habib on Asia TV uploaded on [YouTube](#), March 19.

[4] More details available in a 2015 interview with Intifadh Qanbar, a former leader of the INC who was close to Chalabi and knew Habib well but left the group after disagreements with both. Interview published on [YouTube](#) on October 1, 2015.

[5] For detailed accounts on Aras Habib's history with Chalabi see Roston, Aram. *The Man Who*

*Pushed America to War, the Extra Ordinary Life, Adventures and Obsessions of Ahmad al-Chalabi.* Nation Books, New York 2008.

[6] Habib's interview with Asia TV cited earlier. March 19. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8v4x9-HbTz4&t=291s>

[7] Only 11% of Iraqis have bank accounts. See *Al-Araby al-Jadeed* Nov 22, 2017 <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/economy/2017/11/22/المركزى-العراقى-89-من-المواطنين-لا-يملكون-حسابات-مصرفية>

[8] [Interview with Habib on the Iraqi TV channel Dijla](#), May 8

[9] Author's interview with a parliament staffer who preferred to remain anonymous.

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