



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

BRIEF

Colonel Haitham
Jamil al-‘Afi—
Turkey’s Syrian
Rebel
Commander

The Jihadist
Propagandist
from the
Maldives—Bilad
al-Sham Media’s
Abu Ayyub al-
Maaldifi

Tehran’s Afghan
Strategic
Communicator:
Fatemiyoun’s
Sayed Zuhair

The Thirty-Six
Year Rebellion:
Salif Sadio and
the Struggle for
Senegal’s
Casamance
Region

MUHAMMAD
MANSOUR

NICHOLAS A. HERAS

ANIMESH ROUL

WALIULLAH
RAHMANI

ANDREW
MCGREGOR

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EGYPT’S MOST WANTED CAPTURED: Will Hisham Ashmawy’s Arrest Deal Blow to Militant Groups in Egypt?

Muhammad Mansour

Egyptian authorities have finally heaved a sigh of relief after Libyan security forces arrested the most wanted Egyptian militant, Hisham Ali Ashmawy Mosaad Ibrahim (a.k.a. Abu Omar al-Muhajir al-Masri) “alive” on October 8 in the city of Derna, located 165 miles west of Libya’s border with Egypt.

Spokesperson for the Libyan National Army (LNA), Ahmed Mismari, announced the long-sought capture on his official Facebook page, confirming that Ashmawy was arrested at Derna’s al-Maghar neighborhood “and was wearing an explosive vest but was unable to detonate it.” The LNA said Ashmawy was captured alongside the “wife and children of a second senior alleged militant, Mohamed Rifae Soroor” (also known as Omar Rifae Soroor),

who was killed earlier this year ([Al-Dostour](#), October 8).

Following the arrest, Egyptian President Abul Fatah el-Sisi said at an armed forces seminar on October 11 that, “We have the terrorist Hisham Ashmawy and the hero Ahmad al-Manssy (Referring to [al-Manssy](#) who was killed in a terrorist operation in Sinai on July 7, 2017), they were both humans, officers, and were serving in the same unit,” adding: “The difference, however, is that the first got confused and therefore is a traitor, and the latter was committed to the genuine understanding of safeguarding the Egyptian state. Egyptians clap for him (al-Manssy), but (Ashmawy) is wanted for a trial” ([YouTube](#), October 11).

Arresting Ashmawy is likely to deal a major blow to the weakening militant movement across the country. The Egyptian security forces have recently intensified counter-terrorism operations and frequently arrested dozens of militants. Additionally, the ongoing defeat of Islamic State

(IS) in Syria and Iraq over the past two years has also undermined the militant ecosystem in Egypt and forced Ashmawy to flee the country to Libya.

As Libyan military forces complete their investigations, it is highly likely that Ashmawy will be extradited to Egypt. Ashmawy is wanted there for his role in 17 deadly attacks that caused heavy losses within Egyptian security ranks in Sinai, Cairo, and al-Farfara oasis in Egypt ([Al-Youm Al-Sabae](#), October 8).

In the days following his arrest, Libyan interrogators have extracted information from Ashmawy, including information about the infrastructure of al-Murabitun, some communication channels with al-Qaeda, and the fact that Ashmawy was coordinating with the notorious jihadist, Mokhtar Bel-mokhtar. The two were planning to set up training camps for militants in Libya. Meanwhile, Ashmawy confirmed the death of al-Qaeda militants Sufian Bin Qemo and Omar Refai Soror, saying they were buried in Derna. Ashmawy also said Abu Beraa al-Libi is leading scores of cells and fighting Libyan forces to control the downtown of Derna, where 50 wounded militants are being treated at an old building ([Al-Youm, Al-Sabae](#), October 10).

As a leader of an al-Qaeda-inspired group, al-Murabitun, Ashmawy has been convicted to death in absentia for carrying out deadly attacks across Egypt. These include the assassination of Prosecutor General Hisham Barakat in July 2015 and a raid on Egyptian armed forces in February 2015, which claimed the lives of 29 troops. The most recent attack took place in October 2017,

when al-Murabitun militants ambushed military forces in Giza province, killing 19 soldiers ([Al-Watan](#), October 8; [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), October 2015). Ashmawy has been sentenced to death by both the Egyptian state and by IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who issued the same sentence in August 2015 after the backlash against his once-proclaimed Caliphate.

After his capture, Ashmawy appeared in a video with blood gushing from his face. When asked about his whereabouts, he said his name was “Hisham Ashmawy” and that he was “an Egyptian military officer with a rank of major, serving in Egypt’s thunderbolt forces” ([Cairo 24](#), October 9).

Ashmawy, born in 1978, joined the Egyptian military in 1996. In 2003, he married Nesreen Sayed Ali, a teaching assistant in Ain Shams University in Cairo. In 2011, Ashmawy was dismissed from the military after a court convicted him of inciting violence against the military. Signs of radicalization were apparent in his behavior, which were probably aggravated by his father’s death in 2005. According to Al-Arabiya’s Death Making documentary, Ashmawy was considered a highly-trained officer who had trained with the U.S. Navy SEALs. The training qualified him to serve in the hotspot of the Sinai Peninsula, where deadly bombings had taken place in Dahab and Sharm el-Sheikh in 2005 and 2006 ([El-Watan](#), October 23, 2018). [1]

After his dismissal in 2011, Ashmawy began forming a militant group composed of four other dismissed officers, leaving the country in April 2013 for Turkey. After crossing the border to

Syria, he received training in manufacturing explosive charges. ([El-Watan](#), October 20, 2017).

A year after his dismissal, Ashmawy joined Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM). However, he defected from the Sinai-based militant group in 2014, after the group pledged allegiance to IS in November of that year. Adhering to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, he formed a separate group in Egypt called al-Murabitun as a counterbalance to IS.

Ashmawy has recruited military officers to join his militant groups, including Walid Badr. In 2013, Badr, alongside Ashmawy, attempted to assassinate Mohammad Ibrahim—then Egypt’s interior minister. At this time, ABM, considering itself a part of al-Qaeda, followed up with a video honoring the would-be assassin, Walid Badr. Like Ashmawy, Badr fought in Syria before returning to Egypt. There, authorities claimed Badr was trained by and fought for al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda’s branch in Syria until July 2016.

Capturing Ashmawy alive kills two birds with one stone. On the one hand, Egyptian and Libyan authorities are likely to identify cells Ashmawy formed over the past five years. With this intelligence, the security apparatus will be able to avert future operations. On the other hand, the information he holds will lead the security apparatus to launch further preemptive crackdowns on the leftovers of his group or other Islamist militants across the Western desert with Libya, where Ashmawy used to carry out attacks.

Thanks to Ashmawy’s knowledge of the porous Egyptian-Libyan borders, he was able to smuggle weapons, and recruit and train militants. Now

under arrest, the Libyan and eventually the Egyptian interrogators are likely to uncover evidence leading to the dismantling of further terrorist cells across the countries.

Muhammad Mansour is a highly accomplished investigative journalist with more than ten-year, solid track record of producing high-quality print and online reports for international media outlets, including The Washington Post, The Guardian, The Times and Egypt Independent. He covers a broad range of topics related to Egyptian politics and global affairs. Mansour examines the junctions of Egyptian politics and society as they slowly disintegrate under the pressure of a ruthless military dictatorship. He gave lectures on new media and the Arab Spring in the Czech Republic and India. Mansour is currently a fellow at the Leaders for Democracy program at Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University in New York.

Colonel Haitham Jamil al-'Afsi—Turkey's Syrian Rebel Commander

Nicholas A. Heras

Turkey has begun to pay benefits to the families of Syrian armed opposition fighters who were killed or wounded fighting alongside Turkish forces during the August 2016 Operation Euphrates Shield and the March 2018 Operation Olive Branch. These operations were conducted against the ethnic Kurdish-majority People's Protection Units (YPG); the U.S.-backed, multi-ethnic Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition; and Islamic State (IS). Both operations were directed by Turkey in northern and western Syria.

The benefits given to the families reportedly include the granting of Turkish citizenship and monetary compensation to the families of Syrian fighters who were killed during Operation Olive Branch and Operation Euphrates Shield. The details of these payments were revealed by a Syrian armed opposition commander, Colonel Haitham Jamil al-'Afsi ([Turkey al-Aan](#) [Gaziantep], October 24; [al-Sharq Times](#), October 24).

Colonel Haitham, 58, is one of the most important Turkish-backed Syrian armed opposition leaders remaining in the conflict. He is currently the head of the Syrian National Army, a force of approximately 35,000 armed opposition fighters that was formed in December 2017 ([al-Modon](#), August 12; [al-Araby al-Jadid](#), December 30, 2017). The Syrian National Army is a military organization composed of Syrian

rebel fighters that is directly recruited, trained, and paid for by Turkey. The group is nominally loyal to the opposition Syrian Interim Government (SIG) that is based in opposition-held areas of northern and western Syria ([Qasioun News](#) [Jarablus], December 30, 2017). Colonel Haitham was also the lead organizer for the formation of the Syrian National Army, a task that he worked closely with Turkey to accomplish. He first sought to mobilize the Syrian National Army from armed opposition groups that had participated in Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield ([YouTube](#), November 6, 2017; [Enab Baladi](#) [Jarablus], October 23, 2017). Further, under Colonel Haitham's command, the Syrian National Army is explicitly linked to Turkey's efforts to bring order and administration to opposition-held areas of northern and western Syria, which form a *de facto* Turkish zone of control ([al-Hayat](#), August 12).

He is also the commander of Liwa 51, an armed opposition group that was one of the original groups to participate in Operation Euphrates Shield and which fought IS in the areas north and east of Aleppo city after that operation concluded. Liwa 51 is a constituent member of the Syrian National Army. Since 2017, Colonel Haitham has been the deputy chief of staff of the entire body of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces that are loyal to the Turkish-backed SIG ([Zaman al-Wasl](#) [Jarablus], September 19, 2017; [Smart News Agency](#) [Jarablus], January 18, 2017; [YouTube](#), March 18, 2016). This is a situation that makes Colonel Haitham an instrument for the SIG via Turkey's support. Ankara is attempting to establish itself as the

authority over opposition-controlled areas in northern and western Syria, even potentially including Idlib governorate. Idlib is currently controlled by extremist groups linked to al-Qaeda ([Aksalser](#) [Jarablus], August 13). Colonel Haitham is also a controversial commander because as the head of the Syrian National Army, he has promoted the group's participation in Operation Olive Branch. The operation, however, has been tied to human rights abuses, particularly directed against the ethnic Kurdish population ([Enab Baladi](#) [Jarablus], August 26; [YouTube](#), March 20).

Colonel Haitham is a native of the large market town of Ma'arat Nu'maan in the southern-central area of Idlib governorate, approximately 45 kilometers south of Idlib city ([YouTube](#), March 11, 2013). By the time of his defection in September 2012, he had served nearly three decades in the Syrian Arab Army Air Force. Prior to his defection to the Free Syrian Army, he reportedly was an intelligence source for the opposition movement ([YouTube](#), March 11, 2013). Colonel Haitham was the most important field commander for the FSA-aligned groups in and around Ma'arat Nu'maan. He was the head of the military council that oversaw fighting against the Assad government in and around the town ([YouTube](#), May 18, 2013; [YouTube](#), December 26, 2012).

Later in the conflict, by late 2013, he was a field commander associated with the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF), which at that time was the largest and relatively most powerful of the FSA-aligned armed opposition coalition in northern and western Syria. While an associate of the SRF, he was chosen to oversee the armed

opposition's combat operations in Idlib against IS from December 2013 to February 2014, a campaign that ultimately led to IS's decision to withdraw from Idlib ([YouTube](#), January 28, 2014). Colonel Haitham's time as an important field commander within the SRF has also brought him into conflict with Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), which was the declared al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria and which is now the armed opposition coalition known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). His son, Jamil, was a commander of a constituent group within the SRF. Jamil was arrested and imprisoned by JN/HTS in Ma'arat Nu'maan during the fall 2014 conflict between the group and the SRF. This conflict ended in the total defeat and dissolution of the SRF in northern and western Syria. Jamil was released by JN/HTS in June 2016, but as a result of his family's conflict with the al-Qaeda affiliate, Colonel Haitham is in effect exiled from Ma'arat al-Nu'maan and Idlib governorate ([Zaiton Mag](#) [Idlib], June 11, 2016). Potentially foreshadowing further trouble between himself and JN/HTS, Colonel Haitham favors uniting all of the armed opposition groups in northern and western Syria into the Syrian National Army, including those located in Idlib. Colonel Haitham wants to confront Assad under one command structure, a move that could effectively place JN/HTS under Turkish and Turkish-backed Syrian rebel authority ([Baladi News](#) [Jarablus], August 12).

As a result of his extensive experience leading armed opposition forces on the ground, especially against the Assad government and IS, Colonel Haitham has significant credibility within the Syrian opposition. This credibility is bolstered by the fact that unlike many members

of the FSA leadership, he has generally remained inside of Syria. Colonel Haitham has been a leading member of the FSA-aligned armed opposition forces since 2013, serving in leadership positions within the overall command structure of the FSA, which is constructed mainly outside of Syria. For almost five years he has been the deputy chief of the FSA's general command staff ([YouTube](#), April 29, 2014; [YouTube](#), February 16, 2014). This role in the FSA has allowed Colonel Haitham to participate in international diplomatic processes seeking to end the Syrian civil war, while simultaneously leading rebel fighting groups fighting on the ground inside Syria ([YouTube](#), January 18, 2017; [YouTube](#), December 17, 2015).

Colonel Haitham is well positioned to be one of the most relevant commanders remaining in the Syrian armed opposition into the foreseeable future. His power within the Syrian rebel movement is tied tightly to his good and effective relationship with Turkey. Colonel Haitham's long-standing ties to Turkey, both through the FSA and as a result of his decision to participate as a commander in Operation Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield, provide him with influence that is not readily available to his peers. The Syrian National Army is a direct proxy of Turkey, and it is being positioned to be the Syrian opposition force that Ankara favors as the Turkish authorities seek to construct an alternative political, administrative and security order in large areas of northern and western Syria. Colonel Haitham's role in constructing and running the Syrian National Army makes him one of Turkey's most favored proxy leaders in Syria, and his role may expand in the near

future. Turkey may decide to deploy the Syrian National Army to Idlib, in order to confront organizations such as Huras al-Din, HTS, and the Turkistan Islamic Party, per the terms of the de-militarized zone agreement between Turkey and Russia. This would make Colonel Haitham, as the commander of the Syrian National Army, a key executor of Turkey's responsibilities in Syria, and potentially establish him for the foreseeable future as the key powerbroker in the opposition-held areas of northern and western Syria.

Nicholas A. Heras is the Middle East Security Fellow at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) and Senior Analyst for the Jamestown Foundation.

The Propagandist from the Maldives—Bilad al-Sham Media’s Abu Ayyub al-Maaldifi

Animesh Roul

The Maldivian government has engaged in an effort to restrain radicalized youths from joining jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. Despite these efforts, the total number of Maldivians fighting in the Syrian civil war has reached 61. According to the island nation’s National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC), over 68 people have been intercepted and captured on their way to Syria and Iraq ([Raajje News](#), January 15). This official figure, made public at the beginning of this year, is seen as very modest in comparison to the various local and foreign press reports. These sources estimate the number of Maldivians in Syria to be over 200. Many of these Maldivian fighters have joined the two transnational jihadist rivals—Islamic State (IS) and the al-Qaeda-affiliated Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the erstwhile Jabhat al-Nusra or al-Nusra Front.

Scores of Maldivians are undertaking *hijrat* (migration for religious war) by traveling to Syria and Iraq, or other war-ravaged regions. One of the prime reasons behind this migration has been a robust propaganda campaign, spearheaded by the Bilad al-Sham media (BASM) and run by its Maldivian contingent fighting alongside HTS in Syria. Abu Ayyub al-Maaldifi—a nom de guerre—is the most prominent Maldivian militant biographer associated with BASM, largely responsible for writing and circulating eulogies and graphic

biographies of slain Maldivian HTS militants. His posts on social media platforms (e.g. WordPress, Twitter or Facebook) are largely focused on discussions about Islamic tenets and jihad. They are instrumental in inspiring people back home to travel to Syria to battle alongside these militant groups.

Several Maldivians have died fighting alongside HTS in Iraq and Syria since 2014. Among the dead were leading militant commanders, identified by their jihadist nom de guerre such as Abu Turab, Abu Nuh, and Abu Dujanah. They purportedly joined the Syrian jihad to establish a Caliphate and implement Shari’a in the world. Their lives and journeys to so-called jihad and martyrdom were glorified through the BASM media ([Minivan News Archives](#), May 25, 2014).

Jihadist messages, interviews with HTS commanders, and relevant Islamic literatures, compiled by Abu Ayyub al-Maaldifi and distributed through the BASM, are all a vital part of an elaborate and sophisticated communication strategy for the recruitment of vulnerable youths in the Maldives. The BASM, an influential jihadist media network for Maldivian fighters, aims to win the hearts and minds of Maldivian youths by romanticizing life under the Islamic Caliphate. It chronicles the biographies of its fighters, their journey to Syria and Iraq. The biographies emphasize how the fighters left behind mundane lives, and pays tribute to its slain members.

Abu Ayyub used several Twitter handles (@abuayubmuhammad and @abuayubmaaldif, now suspended) and Facebook pages to populate the virtual world with al-Qaeda and HTS

propaganda. These pages were also used to post tributes to fellow jihadist compatriots aimed at cajoling and coaxing Maldivians to join the group in Syria. He once posted a message on Twitter, supposedly from Idlib, Syria, saying, "by the grace of Allah, we enjoy beautiful scenery and sights; all this is (cost) free. You just need to be a Mujahideen." Among the Maldivian militants of HTS, one identified as Abu Umar Al Maldifi went on the record to speak of the role Abu Ayyub Maaldifi's work played in inspiring his *hijrat*. Other than the audio lectures of Anwar Awlaki and "The Book of Jihad" by Ibn Nuhaas, he followed Abu Ayyub Maaldifi's rich eulogies and biographies published through BASM, especially of Abu Turab and Abu Nuh. (Nuh's biography was written by Abu Dujana Maldifi.) [1]

A cursory look at Abu Ayyub's writings on jihad and his eulogies of at least two slain Maldivian militants sheds light on how BASM propaganda entices Maldivians to the Syrian war theater, by emphasizing al-Qaeda's ideals over its rival Islamic State in Syria. His most detailed tribute is dedicated to Abu Turab and was published in mid-June 2014. It depicts Turab's personal sacrifices and how he renounced the material world, family and wealth for the cause of Islam. [2] Abu Ayyub sketches an emotional narrative by painting Abu Turab as a loving husband, father and grandfather. He goes on to write about how the Maldivian government and security forces imprisoned and tortured Turab's family back home, and how he and his wife struggled for the medical treatment of their youngest daughter, who was suffering from cancer. They ignored cruel taunts from people

and underwent hardships for the treatment of their daughter and to feed their family. Despite these struggles, Turab never rested and worked tirelessly for his family's well-being while also remaining within the tenets of Islam. Turab did this before joining the "caravan of jihad" to reach "the land of jihad." Throughout this narrative, Abu Ayyub urges his fellow Maldivians to:

"learn from Turab's trial and tribulations in life and how he showed patience and sincerity to walk on the path of Islam that ultimately paved his road to join the ranks of the Mujahideen, underwent militant training and how he requested to go to the Ribat (frontier fortifications) and battlefield after the completion of his training." [3][4]

Giving further details of Turab's life and death, Abu Ayyub says that he (Turab, literally "Soil") is a beacon of light for the Muslims of the land of *Sham* (Syria). The 44-year-old Abu Turab was killed on May 25, 2014 on Mount Arbain in the northwestern Syrian city of Idlib, during a joint operation by Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front targeting soldiers loyal to the Bashar al-Assad government. ([Minivan News Archive](#), May 25, 2014).

Abu Ayyub al-Maaldifi's lengthiest eulogy was for the founding editor of the BASM and the leader of Maldivian fighters in Syria (with the then al-Nusra Front), Abu Dujana, consisting of approximately 20 pages. [5] Abu Dujana (also known as Abu Muhammad Maaldifi) was killed

in early September 2014, in Wadi al-Daif in Idlib, Syria. Before starting his rich tribute to the BASM founder, Abu Ayyub dedicated the document to Dujana's mother and urged the readers (Maldivian youths and Muslim students around the world) to reflect and learn from Dujana's life and his journey on the path of Islam and jihad. He went on to describe how Dujana, a "shy and quiet" youth, stood against the influence of the United States and its allies and "puppet rulers," and against its anti-Islamic "democratic values." He explained, with minute details, how Dujana was initially indoctrinated by listening to the Maldivian radio channel called "Radio Atoll" and learned the essentials of Islam and issues relating to *Hadith* (e.g. Deen and Sunnah). Dujana, according to Abu Ayyub, was the only son in the family and was loving, obedient and religiously influenced by his mother. Later, he was exposed to the works of Islamic scholars through the Internet—mostly the writings of radical Islamist ideologues like Ibn Taimiyya, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatadah Filistini, among others. By mentioning these sources of Islamic discourse, Abu Ayyub perhaps wanted to let his readers know where to go for knowledge on Islam and jihad. He went on to discuss how Dujana embarked upon the journey of *hijrat* and jihad in Syria. Abu Ayyub also briefly mentioned the founding of BASM (on Wordpress) and Dujana's role in writing and circulating propaganda materials through social media platforms. He clarified how Dujana was critical of IS and supportive of al-Qaeda's ideals for jihad. [6]

Abu Ayyub al-Maaldifi contributed many other pieces of writing through the BASM and

routinely shared information through his now defunct social media pages. In one post in the format of a diary, titled "And hasten to forgiveness from your Lord," he describes how he feels the pain of Muslims in his heart and sees the deprivation and humiliation of the Muslim *ummah* all around the world. Abu Ayyub wrote that only through the path of jihad can his religion be saved and the banner of *Tawheed* (monotheism) raised high.

The last time BASM issued video propaganda material was in January 2018, aimed at attracting Maldivian recruits into the fold of jihad in Syria. Alarmingly, the last time Maldives police intercepted a group of Maldivians attempting to go and fight in Syria was at Velana International Airport in June 2018 ([Maldives Independent](#), June 07). Whether Abu Ayyub is still in charge of a reincarnated BASM or not, his writings are available on various jihadist forums and open source publishing platforms. These easily accessible propaganda materials on Islam and jihad, depicting the sacrifices of Maldivian militants in Syria, might be still influencing Maldivian youths to join the transnational jihadist movement.

Animesh Roul is the executive director of the New Delhi-based policy research group Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict. He specializes in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing, and armed conflict and violence in South Asia. Mr. Roul has written extensively on these subject areas, being published in edited books, journals, and policy magazines. He co-authored a book on India's indigenous terror group Indian Mujahideen (Springer, 2013). He is regularly cited in the Washington Post, Reuters, Wall Street Journal and Hindustan Times among others. He regularly contributes to The

Jamestown Foundation's Terrorism Monitor and Militant Leadership Monitor.

Notes

[1] "An Interview With A Muhajir in Bilad Al Sham From Maldives PART 1", biladalsham.wordpress.com, May 18, 2015, Available at <http://jihadwahranozumeltaghout.blogspot.com/2015/05/an-interview-with-muhajir-in-bilad-al.html>

[2] "The life of the Maldivian Martyrdom Bomber Abu Turab", June 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20141021123024/https://biladalsham.wordpress.com> (a copy is available with author)

[3] Idib.

[4] Abu Ayyub al-Maaldifi, "The Life of the Maldivian martyrdom bomber, Abu Turab rahimahullah, <https://web.archive.org/web/20141021123024/https://biladalsham.wordpress.com>

[5] Abu - Muhammad - Maldifi, biladalsham.wordpress.com, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/32862377/abu-muhammad-maldifi/3>

[6] [6] Abu Ayyub al-Maaldifi, "The Life of the Maldivian martyrdom bomber, Abu Turab rahimahullah, <https://web.archive.org/web/20141021123024/https://biladalsham.wordpress.com>

Tehran's Afghan Strategic Communicator: Fatemiyoun's Sayed Zuhair Mujahed

Waliullah Rahmani

This past January 6, Iranian media reported that a leader of the Iranian-backed Afghan Shia militia group Fatemiyoun claimed that over 2,000 Afghans had died in Syria, with 8,000 injured ([BBC Persian](#), January 6).

The figure came from the group's senior leader for cultural and strategic communications, Sayed Zuhair Mujahed, who revealed the figures in an interview with Basij News. He also caused some controversy by criticizing the Iranian government for not doing enough to take care of Fatemiyoun's Afghan veterans and diminishing their contributions to Iran's success in Syria.

The casualty count raised many eyebrows inside Afghanistan, and the Afghan government responded on Fatemiyoun for the first time. A spokesman for the Afghan president demanded that Iran stop utilizing Afghan refugees as a proxy force in Syria ([BBC Persian](#), January 6, 2018).

It is also the first time that a Fatemiyoun leader appeared on behalf of the group to talk to the media on the group's death toll, current status, tactical and strategic gains and vision for the future of these forces inside Iran.

The Founding Father and Fatemiyoun's Early History

Fatemiyoun's leaders have typically remained quiet since the group was formed in 2014.

Created by the Iranian government to fight in Syria on behalf of the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the Iranian-backed Shia Afghan militia is comprised of Shia Afghan refugees who have long been abused and exploited in Iran. They were recruited to fight in Syria through promises of Iranian citizenship and (relatively) high pay. Emphasizing the need to protect holy Shia shrines in Damascus was also a tool used to drive recruitment. The group is completely under command of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's (IRGC) Quds Force.

Further details on Fatemiyoun's leadership are hard to find. Its fighters are highly conservative in documenting or publishing stories on the actual commanders in the battlefield or the leaders of the group. During the author's research, it was almost impossible to find data regarding current leadership of the group.

Despite the group's policy of keeping the identities of the leadership anonymous, many documentaries and pieces have been published on the dead leaders of Fatemiyoun. One of these publicized dead leaders is the group's own founding father, Ali Reza Tawasuli, who is also called Abu Hamed.

Abu Hamed was one of the most capable proxy fighters for Iran in Syria. Born in 1962 in Afghanistan, Abu Hamed was reported to be the founding father of Fatemiyoun before his death fighting the al-Qaeda-affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra in the Daraa province of Syria in 2014. The three other cofounders of Fatemiyoun are named as Shahid Bakhshi, Shahid Kalani and Shahid Husaini, all of whom died in Syria ([Navideshahed](#), November 20, 2017).

Although there is not much information on the current leaders of Fatemiyoun, the group is still operating in Syria. It is considered among the most reliable proxy force for IRGC leader Qasem Soleimani.

Most of the founders and early fighters of Fatemiyoun have a background in Sepah-e Mohammad, a group that was formed fighting against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. In the post-civil war era in the late 1990s, the group fought the Taliban. When the Taliban collapsed, Sepah-e Mohammad dispersed and most of its fighters went to reside in Iran. Abu Hamed and the other co-founders of Fatemiyoun were the original Iranian-trained Sepah-e Mohammad fighters and commanders ([Kayhan News](#), June 12, 2015).

With its high performance on the frontlines, Iranians began to invest more in Fatemiyoun ([mashreghnews.ir](#), June 14, 2015) After its expansion, a new generation of Iranian-born Afghan refugees began to participate in parts of the conflict other than on the frontlines. Young Afghans in particular are taking part in Fatemiyoun's propaganda and psychological warfare efforts. One member of this new generation is Sayed Zuhair Mujahed, who has professional media experience.

Cultural and Media Arm

As a Shia religious student/clergyman, Sayed Zuhair Mujahed is a leading figure in charge of Fatemiyoun's cultural and strategic communications ([Harime Haram](#), November 15, 2017). His role has been mainly focused on documenting Fatemiyoun's presence, operations and tactical and strategic gains through

documentaries, which later are distributed across social media and released from Iran.

Fatemiyoun's cultural and strategic communications department includes professional producers and writers in Iran and a group of professional Afghan cameramen on the frontlines of war in Syria. While it is not clear how many people work for the organization within Iran, it is clear that they are able to place people with media skills in the field. Nine media professionals were working alongside [Fatemiyoun fighters on the frontlines in Syria](#) ([IRIB News Agency](#), August 18, 2017).

By 2016, three years after the formation of Fatemiyoun, the group's media arm had produced 10 documentaries. Some of these were presented at Iranian domestic film galas ([IRIB News Agency](#), August 18, 2017).

Fatemiyoun's cultural and media department distributes documentaries over Telegram, YouTube, and Aparat ([YouTube](#), August 17, 2016; [Aparat](#), August 18). Dozens of such documentaries have been uploaded on each of these outlets, showcasing the group's activities on the frontlines in Syria.

From Mullah to Strategic Communications Mastermind

Sayed Zuhair Mujahed was born in the Fariman district of Iran's Khorasan-e Razavi province, to an Afghan refugee family. He started his religious education in Iranian seminaries at a young age. Later on, being enthusiastic about photography, Mujahed focused on amateur photography and videography ([Serat News](#), October 25, 2017).

Being a young refugee in the seminaries, Mujahed also followed his professional studies, entering university as an arts and cinema student. He has obtained a bachelor's degree in Islamic Studies and another in Cinema. Currently Mujahed is pursuing a Master's degree in Quranic Studies from Al Mustafa International University, which is directly funded by the Iranian Supreme Leader's office and has established a presence in over 70 countries. The university is also considered to be producing the masterminds of Shia ideology across the world.

Having a professional background in cinema, arts and Islamic studies, Mujahed has earned a reputation in documenting and disseminating the message of why and how Fatemiyoun was formed and why it is a strategic force needed to stay alive for Iran's global ambitions.

Before joining Fatemiyoun, Mujahed produced professional documentaries on Islamic issues. He has claimed that he worked for the Isteqlal, a Herat, Afghanistan-based TV station, during the month of Ramadan in 2013 ([honaremotaali.ir](#), January 4, 2016).

Mujahed says that he joined Fatemiyoun because of the group's values:

“Defense of the holy shrine are values of Islam and humanity. The shrine is under threat. So for the sake of those values I entered learning and practicing arts, and for them I entered the warzone” ([Serat News](#), October 25, 2017).

The Future

Among the Iranian proxy groups fighting in Syria, including Hezbollah, Fatemiyoun fighters have the best performance on the Syrian battlefields, according to Iranian news outlets. In a Friday prayers speech, Ebrahim Raisi, the influential Iranian clergyman, politician, former presidential candidate, and a close ally of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, took the opportunity to talk about Fatemiyoun. Speaking of the group's vital importance to Iran's national security, Raisi said: "If Fatemiyoun corps didn't exist, ISIS would reach Tehran" (ufuqnews.com, November 19, 2016). Such a strategic calculus was one of the reasons Fatemiyoun was upgraded to a corps, which in Iran is made up of 10,000-20,000 fighters or armed men (Mizan News Agency, May 7, 2017).

There are clear indicators that Iran has been dealing with Fatemiyoun differently, giving these fighters and their families special treatment. The head of the Shahid Foundation of Iran has talked of providing support to 400 families of dead Fatemiyoun fighters (Radio Farda, August 24, 2016; Deutsche Welle Farsi, December 3, 2017). He also mentioned that along with other support, these families will also receive Iranian citizenship—something that has not been available to Afghan refugees for the past four decades (Deutsche Well Farsi, December 5, 2017).

The above issues notwithstanding, there are unconfirmed reports that Fatemiyoun fighters are in Yemen. Though no Iranian or other sources have confirmed this presence, this issue points to the evolving idea that Fatemiyoun can serve as a global proxy force for furthering Iran's foreign policy interests.

Fatemiyoun is a source of hard and soft power that is growing stronger under the supervision of the Iranian Quds forces. Fatemiyoun leaders like Sayed Zuhair Mujahed, who have expertise in both Shia Islamic theological studies and in media technologies, show the group has a future as an emerging proxy force. In his words, Mujahed says that under the direct guidance of Iran's Supreme Leader, they will continue to work to counter what he terms the cultural hegemony of the enemies of Islam (nasimoline.ir, August 16, 2017). As the chief strategic communications leader, Mujahed sees himself as the person to direct Fatemiyoun's diverse and unorganized strategic communications initiatives and bring them under an organized and systemic umbrella (nasimoline.ir, August 16, 2017). He is an emerging strategist and strong communications figure who plans to lead a complex psycho-social warfare operation that could facilitate his elevation into the next level of leadership of the group.

The group has performed strongly on the battlefield and has displayed loyalty to the government in Tehran. It provides ideological motivation to Iran's large population of Afghan refugees. Fatemiyoun displays hard and soft power characteristics, making them a tempting tool to use for Tehran.

It is also important to understand that there are 3 million Afghan people in Iran. They are more impoverished than the average Iranian, and are desperate for work and citizenship. Service in Fatemiyoun meets these needs for Afghan refugees in Iran, which is another important reason for taking the Fatemiyoun issue seriously.

The available human capital of Afghan refugees in Iran makes it easy to continue and even expand Fatemiyoun on future potential Iranian regional battlefields.

Waliullah Rahmani is a security and political affairs expert specializing in terrorism, insurgency, Afghanistan-Pakistan affairs and Islamic movements. He has led a think-tank in Kabul and advised national and international organizations on regional security and political trends of South Asia and Middle East

The 36-Year Rebellion: Salif Sadio and the Struggle for Senegal's Casamance Region

Andrew McGregor

Low-intensity conflicts can be among the most resistant to resolution. A case in point is the 36-year separatist struggle in Casamance, the southern region of Senegal. While the conflict has veered between ceasefires and flare-ups, one man, Salif Sadio, has dedicated himself to keeping the separatist cause alive through his leadership of Atika, the armed wing of the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC). The price of his struggle has been thousands killed and the devastation of the local economy.

The conflict in Casamance has much to do with its physical separation from the rest of Senegal by the small nation known as “The Gambia.” The Gambia, which became independent in 1965, was a former colony of the UK, while the area surrounding it was French territory, which became independent as the nation of Senegal in 1960. The region south of The Gambia is known as Casamance and was integrated with Senegal by an eastern land connection that left The Gambia surrounded by Senegal.

An attempt at union between Senegal and The Gambia in 1982 (the Senegambian Confederation) brought economic benefits to Casamance, but the local economy was hit hard when the confederation collapsed in 1989. Administratively, Casamance was divided by the government into the districts of Ziguinchor to the west and Kolda to the east in the 1980s in

the hope of ending references to “Casamance.” [1]

The main peoples found in Casamance are Mandinke, Pulaar and Jola (or Diola). The dominant ethnic group in Senegal is the Wolof, whose central role in the administration is resented by many Jola, who make up only 4% of Senegal’s population.

By the 1980s, the Christian and Animist Jolo people of Casamance began to speak of separation from an exploitative Muslim regime in the Senegalese capital of Dakar (Senegal is 92% Muslim). The Jola, representing roughly a third of the Casamance population, dominate the ranks of the MFDC, though many Jola see the movement as inhibiting development and have nothing to do with the separatists ([The Guardian](#), June 19, 2012).

Salif Sadio and the MFDC are angered by Senegal’s planned expansion of its resource sector, which will include exploitation of oil, gas, zircon and other minerals in Casamance. The MFDC claim the proceeds of such work go directly to the national government in Dakar without any benefit to the people of Casamance. Sadio also claims these projects will cause environmental devastation, though his own movement is accused of partaking in the massive ongoing deforestation of Casamance.

The MFDC

The MFDC was founded in 1982 by Father Augustin Diamacoune Senghor, though a movement for regional autonomy had existed since 1947. [2] Atika was formed three years later in 1985. Oil was discovered offshore in

Casamance in the early 1990s, emboldening the separatist movement, but bringing on massive government repression of separatist activities. [3]

The first split in the MFDC dates back to 1992, when northern elements were prepared to negotiate a settlement, but Jola-dominated southern elements, such as those led by Salif Sadio, were determined to offer armed resistance to the Senegalese state. [4] Dakar’s military response to the insurgency was to drive the MRDC into neighboring Guinea-Bissau with such intensity that it nearly created a border war with that nation, as well as creating alienation in the local population. [5]

Early Years

In 1998, Sadio crossed into Guinea-Bissau and joined the military rebellion led by Brigadier General Ansumane Mané. The Brigadier (then chief-of-staff) had been suspended on suspicion of trafficking arms from Bissau-Guinean weapons depots to the MFDC separatists in Casamance. The MFDC had already been engaged in bloody clashes with Bissau-Guinean troops along the border in January 1998 and were ready to support a change of regime. In the civil war that followed Brigadier Mané’s June 1998 coup, the MFDC fought alongside the vast majority of the Bissau-Guinean army which sided with Mané against the government of President João Bernardo Vieira. Military intervention by Senegal and Guinea led to a ceasefire and formation of a government of national unity in February 1999, but President Vieira survived only until May, when a second coup overthrew him. In the meantime, Sadio’s support for the military rebels had solidified

connections that would serve him well in the future.

Determined to exterminate the MFDC, the Senegalese military shelled Ziguinchor, the largest city in Casamance, in 1999, even though it could hardly be called a MFDC stronghold. The resulting civilian casualties and displacement of residents did little to encourage loyalty to the state.

The Casamance Rebellion

Diamacoune agreed to a peace agreement in 2004 that called for the integration of MFDC fighters into the Senegalese security services and economic development in Casamance. Other factions of the MFDC rejected the agreement, however, and continued their armed movement for separation. The agreement eventually collapsed in August 2006.

In early 2006, the leaders of other MFDC factions condemned Sadio for his unwillingness to join the peace process and threatened to “outlaw” him. [6] In the following year, Sadio purged most of the older commanders in his group, whom he suspected of moderate tendencies, and replaced them with more aggressive younger commanders. [7]

After several years of avoiding direct confrontations with the Senegalese Army, the MFDC stepped up attacks on the military in late 2006 after Moroccan troops arrived to assist in a demining campaign. The MFDC, which uses mines as an important part of their arsenal, suspected that Dakar had brought in the Moroccans to assist in an effort to capture Salif Sadio. [8]

In March 2006, the president of Guinea-Bissau, João Bernardo Vieira (who had returned from post-coup exile in 2005 to be re-elected as president), with the encouragement of his rival and military chief-of-staff General Baptista Tagme na Wale, decided that it was necessary to expel Sadio’s forces from Guinea-Bissau to help further peace efforts in neighboring Senegal. Though military operations succeeded in driving Sadio from his base in Guinea-Bissau, Sadio orchestrated an orderly withdrawal into Casamance, mining roads behind him and mounting attacks on Senegalese garrisons near the border to allow his men to retake old MFDC bases in the Sindian region of north Casamance, close to the border with The Gambia. [9]

The charismatic Abbé Diamacoune died in Paris in January 2007, but he had already lost control of the movement he founded, which split before his death into three major factions led by Sadio, Caesar Badiatte, and Mamadou Niantang Diatta. With fighting between the groups unsettling the entire region, the Senegalese military sent armor and heavy weapons to Casamance for an offensive focused on Sadio’s Atika faction, the most intransigent of the three. [10]

Sadio found refuge in The Gambia, ruled by President Yahya Jammeh, a Jola Muslim known for corruption and his use of assassination squads who took power in a 1994 *coup d’état*. In 2007, several MFDC leaders claimed the government of The Gambia was supplying arms to MFDC “hard-liners” such as Salif Sadio. [11]

Heavy fighting broke out around Casamance’s main city of Ziguinchor in August 2008 as the

MFDC launched a series of raids to steal the bicycles, mobile phones and identity papers of local residents. Farmers were warned by the militants that if they returned to their fields they would be treated as army informants ([IRIN](#), August 26, 2009).

After relations with The Gambia's President Jammeh soured in 2009, Sadio shifted his base back to Guinea-Bissau, where he enjoyed a good relationship with a former comrade-in-arms, Captain Zamora Induta, the new military chief-of-staff and a veteran of the military rebellion of 1998-1999. [12]

A shipment of Iranian arms was found hidden amid building materials on a ship that arrived in Lagos harbor in October 2010. Investigators believed the arms were intended to be shipped to The Gambia and then distributed to the MFDC. The incident resulted in Senegal recalling its ambassador to Iran ([BBC](#), December 15, 2010). Other arms shipments might have made it through; Senegalese troops were surprised in December 2010, when MFDC forces using newly acquired equipment such as mortars, rocket launchers and Russian-made "Dushka" machine guns killed seven soldiers near the town of Bignona ([RFI](#), December 28, 2010).

Fighting flared up again in December 2011, when at least 12 Senegalese soldiers were killed in clashes with the MFDC ([SAPA](#), December 21, 2011). The election of Macky Sall as Senegal's president in March 2012 opened new opportunities for a negotiated settlement of the Casamance issue. Talks with Salif Sadio's representatives began in Rome in October 2012 under the auspices of the Community of

Sant'Egidio, a Vatican-aligned charity specializing in conflict mediation. Two months later, Sadio's faction released eight hostages in a gesture of good-will ([AFP](#), November 10, 2013).

When Macky Sall became Senegal's president in 2012, one of his first promises was to bring a swift end to the Casamance conflict. If the promise sounded familiar, it was because his predecessor Abdoulaye Wade had promised in 2000 to resolve the crisis in 100 days through a combination of disarmament, demining and large agricultural projects in Casamance ([al-Jazeera](#), February 14, 2012).

To keep the peace, President Wade supplied the MFDC factions with cash and rice. Sadio was reported to have used the money to buy weapons rather than distribute it to his fighters as intended ([Seneweb.com](#), April 10, 2015). Nonetheless, by May 1, 2014, Sadio was ready to declare a unilateral ceasefire, still officially in place today.

The MFDC in The Gambia

Back in The Gambia, President Jammeh's long run in power came to an end with an election loss in December 2016. Jammeh, however, refused to step down to allow Adama Barrow, the surprise winner of the election, to take power.

After his election loss, Jammeh was reported to have recruited mercenaries from several West African regions, including MFDC fighters, to prepare for an expected intervention by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to remove him from power ([Liberian Observer](#), January 19, 2017). Senegal took

leadership of the ECOWAS operation and Jammeh fled Gambia on January 21, 2017.

As relations between Senegal and The Gambia improved under President Adama Barrow, Omar Sadio, a son of Salif Sadio who had served in the Gambian Army since 2005, was relieved of his rank and arrested ([Gambia Echo](#), October 12, 2017). His detention appeared to have been part of a sweep of suspected Jammeh loyalists in the military, many of whom were brought in by the ex-president from neighboring states in the belief they would be personally loyal to the president and not identify with Gambians.

Slaughter in the Forest—A Battle for Resources

The ceasefire was threatened this year by the January 6 execution-style killing of 14 alleged loggers in the Bayotte Forest of Casamance. Many of the hardwoods found in the forests of Casamance, such as teak and rosewood, are of high value. Much of the wood taken illegally is shipped through The Gambia on to China, where it is highly prized ([AFP](#), January 24).

Two armed men were killed by security forces in separate clashes shortly after the massacre as Senegalese troops rounded up suspected militants. Sadio promptly denied any involvement by his faction of the MFDC. In an interview recorded at his forest base near the Gambian border, Sadio insisted "[t]he killing was only a pretext that served the Senegalese army to trigger military operations in Casamance." He demanded the release of "innocent civilians" detained in the sweeps and warned that the MFDC's unilateral ceasefire might end if the

operations continued ([Jeune Afrique/AFP](#), January 24).

Sadio, who has accused the army of cutting timber in protected areas, admits his men beat loggers and even burn their trucks, but insists they have never killed loggers ([Jeune Afrique/AFP](#), January 24). Sadio rejects allegations that he cooperates with The Gambia to extract valuable hardwoods from Casamance ([Senenews.com](#), January 24).

An emerging irritant is the plan by Australian firm Astron Zircon to dig out sand dunes on the Casamance coast to remove deposits of zircon, a gemstone with many applications. Locals fear the removal of these natural barriers to the sea will result in the salinization of farmland and drinking water ([DakarActu](#), June 27). The government in Dakar insists the Zircon extraction will provide economic benefits to Casamance, but Sadio has warned that "the exploitation of zircon represents a declaration of war. Many times we have agreed with Senegal not to touch anything and wait for the settlement of the conflict." [13]

Conclusion

Salif Sadio's faction of the MFDC constitutes a destabilizing force in the Senegal/Gambia/Guinea-Bissau region. Prospects for a negotiated settlement in Casamance have grown remote with the split of the MFDC into three mutually suspicious factions. A military solution without coordinated regional cooperation is just as elusive, with MFDC fighters currently slipping across international borders whenever they are pressured.

Senegal's government has tried different means of dealing with the MFDC, including pay-offs and military repression, but little effort has been put into addressing the social, economic and environmental underpinnings of Casamance separatism. Without such efforts, hardliners like Salif Sadio will continue to draw support from disaffected residents, particularly amongst the Jola ethnic group, whose culture and grievances have attracted little attention from government officials tasked with dealing with them.

Andrew McGregor is Director of Aberfoyle International Security, a Toronto-based agency specializing in security issues related to the Islamic world. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Toronto's Dept. of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations in 2000 and is a former Research Associate of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs. In October 2007 he took over as managing editor of the Jamestown Foundation's Global Terrorism Analysis publications. He is the author of an archaeological history of Darfur published by Cambridge University in 2001 and publishes frequently on international security issues. His latest book is A Military History of Modern Egypt, published by Praeger Security International in 2006.

Notes

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[8] "Casamance: Escalation in Rebel Attacks," US State Department Cable 06DAKAR3016_a, December 27, 2006, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06DAKAR3016_a.html

[9] "Casamance: Chief Rebel Stronger than Anticipated," US State Department Cable 06DAKAR1005_a, April 26, 2006, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06DAKAR1005_a.html. Three years after the offensive against Salif Sadio, the rivalry between General Na Waie and President Vieira proved fatal. The general was assassinated in a bomb attack on March 1, 2009; the next day, Vieira, who had turned his nation into a "narco-state," was hacked to pieces by machete by troops loyal to the general (*The National* [Abu Dhabi], March

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