



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

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IS FREED TALIBAN CO-FOUNDER MULLAH ABDUL GHANI BARADAR THE KEY TO PEACE?

Animesh Roul

After almost nine years of incarceration in a Pakistani jail, Abdul Ghani Baradar Akhund (Akhund being an honorific for Islamic clerics and Baradar being a name fondly given to Abdul Ghani by fellow Taliban leaders)—popularly known as Mullah Baradar—was released on October 22. Mullah Baradar is one of the most influential moderate faces of the Afghan Taliban movement. His release is a part of the Qatar-U.S.-Pakistan-led tripartite effort to revive peace talks with the Taliban in Afghanistan (The News, October 22). Widespread skepticism over the timing of his release notwithstanding, the so-called Taliban Emirate welcomed Mullah Baradar’s freedom in a statement on their official website (Al Emarah/Voice of Jihad, October 25). Following Mullah Baradar’s release, other Taliban leaders—such as Mullah Abdul Samad

Sani, Mullah Samad Khan and Salahuddin—were also released from Pakistani prisons, a grand gesture largely symbolic to show Pakistan’s seriousness about Afghan peace.

Why has Abdul Ghani Baradar remained an important Taliban figurehead even after being out of power for so many years? Arguably, it is because he is one of the four co-founders of the Taliban and a spiritual figurehead who toiled to establish the Taliban movement in the region, alongside the deceased supreme leader Mullah Muhammad Omar. At the time of his arrest in February 2010, he was the deputy chief of the Taliban in Afghanistan. In 2003, he was appointed the Mullah Omar’s deputy along with another powerful Taliban leader, Mullah Ubaidullah Akhund. Baradar, (literally, “brother”) was earlier scheduled to be released by Pakistani authorities to negotiate with the Afghan Taliban, but his safe passage faced numerous problems due to situations on the ground and pre-conditions imposed by the Kabul administration.

Not much is known about Baradar's childhood or his formative years as a Taliban commander. According to the U.N. and Interpol, however, Mullah Baradar is about 50 years old (born in 1968) and hails from Deh Rahwod district in southern Afghanistan's Oruzgan Province. He belongs to the Pashtun tribe of the Popalzai ([UNSC List 1988, Generated November 20](#); [Interpol.int, Accessed November 20](#)).

A cursory look at Mullah Baradar's career inside the Taliban movement suggests that a strong but silent section of Taliban leaders are keen on—or at least favorable towards—reconciliations in Afghanistan in order to end the decades-long conflict. Baradar now represents the political side of the Taliban rather than the militant Taliban faction. During the Taliban's reign (1996-2001), he served as the governor of Herat and Nimruz provinces. His name was mentioned as "Deputy Minister of Defense under the Taliban regime" in the UNSC list of individuals and entities belonging to or associated with the Taliban ([UNSC List 1988, generated November 20](#)). He also headed military units under Taliban rule in Kabul and Kandahar ([Dunya News, September 11, 2013](#)). Despite being an able military commander who fought many battles against the Soviet invaders in the 1980s and led offensives against the United States post-2001, he only rose to prominence after taking charge of the Taliban's *Rahbari Shura*. Widely known as the Quetta Shura, it is the highest decision-making body based in Pakistan (in exile) and active since 2003. He succeeded Mullah Obaidullah after the latter's arrest in Pakistan in 2007.

Though rumors have been rife in the press since early October, this spate of high-profile releases of Taliban leaders is being seen as a result of high-level negotiations between visiting Qatari government representatives and the Pakistani government. U.S. influence behind the development is unambiguously visible, with the Special Envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad visiting Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Taliban's Qatar offices between October 4 and 10 in order to meet all of the stakeholders involved in the peace process. The purpose is to impel the stalled process of reconciliation in Afghanistan. It is likely that Khalilzad—the Afghan-born, former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan—had requested the Pakistani government to release Mullah Baradar and other senior Taliban leaders in order to facilitate the peace process. It is now expected that Mullah Baradar—after safe passage—will use his clout and authority with various hardline Taliban factions in order to find an agreeable political solution or settlement to the Afghan conflict through negotiation and dialogue.

World powers including the United States and Russia are of the opinion that the Taliban is not losing any ground in Afghanistan and the situation remains the same as before. General Joseph Dunford, the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently reiterated this fact. Still, he said that "we do believe the Taliban know that at some point they do have to reconcile." ([Tolo News, November 19, 2018](#)).

The most concerning aspect now is that given the Taliban is not losing, what will prompt Baradar, a battle-hardened Taliban leader, to push for a negotiation or come to an

understanding with Western powers or the Afghan government? While questions over the timing of Baradar's release and his potential to bring about reconciliation will be answered at some point, his willingness to exert influence over a new breed of Taliban commanders (e.g. current Taliban deputy leaders Mullah Muhammad Yaqoob and Sirajuddin Haqqani), and more importantly, his physical health will play a vital role. Whether or not he can successfully bridge the gap between the different Taliban factions and drive them to the negotiating table is another matter, which only time will answer.

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Exceeding Expectations: An Assessment of Taliban Leader Haibatullah Akhundzada

Sudha Ramachandran

On June 9, the Taliban announced a three-day ceasefire with Afghan forces ([Pajhwok](#), June 9). This was the first time since the group was ousted from power in November 2001 that the Taliban has called for a ceasefire. Since then, although violence on the ground in Afghanistan has surged, the Taliban has engaged in two rounds of direct talks with the United States as well as in international negotiations hosted by Russia. Its new peace overtures have raised questions regarding its commitment to a negotiated settlement to the conflict and the capacity of its chief, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, to enforce a settlement on its fighters.

In May 2016, when Akhundzada, a religious cleric with little military experience, was declared Taliban chief following the death of Mullah Akhtar Mansour in a drone strike, he was widely perceived by outside experts to be a weak leader. Thirty months after his ascension to the top post, it does seem that Akhundzada was "underestimated." [1] He has managed to hold together a fragmenting Taliban. Indeed, the fortunes of the Taliban are on an upswing. The Taliban that the U.S. is engaging now at the negotiating table and on the battlefield is stronger than it has ever been over the past 17 years.

Background

Born in the late 1960s in Kandahar's Panjwai district, Akhundzada came from a family of religious teachers. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, his family relocated to Baluchistan in Pakistan. He pursued religious studies there under the guidance of Afghan *ulema* (Islamic scholars). Akhundzada is reported to have participated in the Islamist resistance against the Soviets in the 1980s. During Taliban rule (1996-2001), he worked at the Kandahar provincial court, where he came into contact with Mullah Omar, and then went on to head military courts in Nangarhar and Kabul until the fall of the regime ([Afghan Analysts Network](#), May 27, 2016). His verdicts were harsh and reflected the Taliban's extreme reading of Islam ([Express Tribune](#), May 25, 2016). Akhundzada advised Mullah Omar, the Taliban's founder-leader, on religious matters and enjoyed his trust ([Afghan Analysts Network](#), May 27, 2016). When Mullah Mansour succeeded Mullah Omar, Akhundzada served as his deputy.

Why Akhundzada?

On May 25, 2016, the Taliban declared Akhundzada as its new chief. The decision was reportedly unanimous. Unlike the controversy and conflict that accompanied Mullah Mansour's ascension, Akhundzada's appointment to the top post was met with little resistance. Various Taliban commanders pledged allegiance to the new leader ([Daily Outlook Afghanistan](#), May 29, 2016).

The decision of the Taliban *shura* (supreme council) to appoint Akhundzada as the chief was driven primarily by "concerns at that time over

the insurgent group's possible fragmentation." Mullah Mansour's leadership had been divisive—powerful military commanders like Mullah Rasoul had even broken away and taken with them many fighters. Akhundzada was seen as a person who would unify the Taliban. As the new chief, Akhundzada—who belongs to the Nurzai tribe—was expected "to placate the large number of Nurzai fighters in the Taliban and breakaway factions, who had been alienated by Mansour's rule." [2]

Scholar not Soldier

Unlike both his predecessors, Akhundzada lacks battlefield management experience. However, this does not seem to have weakened the Taliban's capacity to carry out deadly attacks on high-security installations in Kabul or capture and hold territory. This is partly because Sirajuddin Haqqani, leader of the Haqqani Network and a deputy of Akhundzada, has rich battlefield experience and provides the Taliban with military leadership. [3]

Besides, the Taliban insurgency is highly decentralized. "Taliban military commanders are empowered to make decisions regarding operations independently and with consultation sometimes of the military commission rather than the supreme leader. Akhundzada's approval is not required in most cases." [4]

Akhundzada's biggest asset is his impressive knowledge and experience in Islamic law. He was a religious teacher to thousands of Taliban fighters—including the sons and grandsons of its leaders—during the winter months when there was a lull in fighting. He thus has their respect, acceptance and obedience. [5] His esteem surged

when his son carried out a suicide attack on the “Sangorian group,” a government-backed anti-Taliban militia. [6] Akhundzada may not be charismatic but “his low-profile persona” has made him less controversial. [7]

As Taliban chief, Akhundzada has managed to unify the Taliban and keep it intact. Indeed, several Taliban leaders such as Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir and Mullah Baz Mohammad, who fell out with Mullah Mansour, “have returned to the fold and accepted Akhundzada as the new supreme leader.” [8]

Internal Challenges

Although Akhundzada’s leadership has arrested the fragmenting of the Taliban—which grew to serious proportions under Mansour—there are simmering tensions that could erupt in the future. Members of the *Rahbari Shura* (Leadership Council) from the southern provinces, for instance, are opposed to Haqqani’s prominence in the Taliban leadership. Issues of contention include appointments, areas of operation, distribution of resources and funding from other countries. Apparently, Haqqani is “receiving [a] significant amount of resources from Iran,” and leaders like Akhundzada and Gul Agha—head of the Taliban’s finance commission—resent Haqqani for not sharing it with them. [9]

Akhundzada does not face any serious challenges to his leadership at this point. However, Pakistan’s recent release of former Taliban deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Biradar “could insert a new element into the Taliban leadership situation.” Biradar has rich battlefield experience and by being close to Mullah Omar he had established his high status in the Taliban.

His return from eight years in Pakistan’s custody will see him “catapulted to a still higher position.” His membership in the Rahbari Shura is likely to be revived. He could be “the frontrunner as the Taliban’s next leader if something happens to Akhundzada.” However, it is unlikely that Akhundzada would be replaced to make way for Biradar in the near future; no Taliban supreme leader has been replaced hitherto and is unlikely to happen in Akhundzada’s case. [10]

Calculated Risks

Under Akhundzada, the Taliban has adopted a rather fluid approach to jihadist groups. Relations with al-Qaeda remain strong but Akhundzada seems to be seeking some distance from the group, perhaps on account of Haqqani’s strong ties to the group. [11] Although Al-Qaeda chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri expressed allegiance to Akhundzada, the latter is yet to publicly acknowledge Zawahiri’s pledge.

As for the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), in his initial months as Taliban chief, Akhundzada—who was perhaps keen on the Taliban focusing its energies on the Afghan government—called on his fighters to avoid clashes with ISKP. [12] It was only when ISKP continued to attack the Taliban that the latter went all out against the group. This is in contrast to Mullah Mansour, who was relentless in his targeting of ISKP from the start.

In recent months, Akhundzada has taken steps that even his powerful predecessors did not risk. For instance, in June, the Taliban reciprocated a unilateral ceasefire announced by the Afghan government. The move was fraught with risk:

Afghan soldiers and Taliban hardliners opposed to the truce could have sabotaged it. That the latter did not indicates that the rank-and-file “continue to obey orders from above.” [13]

On becoming its chief, Akhundzada stated that the Taliban would not participate in “any type of peace talks” ([Press TV](#), May 25, 2016). Indeed, in his statements he routinely describes the Afghan government as American, corrupt, and incompetent and has refused to engage in talks with it unless U.S. troops leave the country. Like his predecessors, he has been demanding “direct dialogue” with the U.S. ([Voice of Jihad](#), August 18).

Akhundzada’s rhetoric on talks makes him seem uncompromising and intransigent. Yet the Taliban under his leadership announced a ceasefire—albeit a short one—and is engaged in direct talks not only with the U.S. but, for the first time, with Russia as well. So is Akhundzada not the hardliner on talks he was thought to be? Is this scholar-leader, in contrast to his soldier-predecessors, likely to lead the Taliban towards peace?

This is unlikely.

Afghan analysts say that the Taliban announced a ceasefire as it “had no other choice.” Had it rejected the Afghan government’s ceasefire, it would have appeared intransigent and unreasonable. This would have helped President Ghani sell the idea to the international community that it was “irreconcilable. As for the ongoing peace talks, the Taliban’s participation is tactical. Haqqani is hoping to secure the release of his brother, who is in American custody, under some deal with the U.S. [14] Clearly,

Akhundzada understands well the tactical benefits of ceasefires and talks.

Advantage Taliban

The Taliban is doing well on the battlefield and now controls more land than it ever has in the past 17 years. The Taliban-ISKP competition in Afghanistan is going in the Taliban’s favor and ISKP controls only a few districts in Nangarhar province. The Taliban has managed to gain a degree of legitimacy and respectability with countries like Russia and Iran, which until recently regarded it as a terrorist threat ([The Hindu](#), September 21). Even India has come around to participating in the Russia-led talks with the Taliban, albeit in a non-official capacity ([Tolo News](#), November 9)

Conclusion

As Taliban chief, Akhundzada has exceeded expectations so far. His main achievement was to unify the group. In the two-and-a half years that he has been at the helm, the Taliban has performed well on the battlefield. Whether it will be able to translate these military successes into gains at the negotiating table remains to be seen.

Of course, these achievements cannot be credited to Akhundzada alone. Circumstances have favored him. The Taliban has done well militarily because of the drawing down of U.S.-led forces. Again, U.S. military offensives against ISKP have benefited the Taliban. And fear of ISKP has prompted countries like Russia to support the Taliban. Still, had Akhundzada not held the Taliban together, it wouldn’t have been able to draw advantage from these developments.

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Notes

[1] Author Interview with Rahimullah Yusufzai, Peshawar-based expert on the Taliban, November 6.

[2] Author Interview with Indian intelligence official, November 2.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Yusufzai, n.1.

[5] Indian intelligence official, n.2.

[6] Author Interview with *Hekmatullah Azamy*, Acting Head of the Kabul-based Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies, October 22.

[7] Indian intelligence official, n.2.

[8] Yusufzai, n.1.

[9] Azamy, n.6.

[10] Yusufzai, n.1.

[11] Indian intelligence official, n.2.

[12] Azamy, n.6.

[13] Indian intelligence official, n.2.

[14] Azamy, n.6.

At War with the Taliban—A Profile of Islamic State Fighter Moavia Uzbeki

Farhan Zahid

The recent Battle of Darzab saw the Afghan Taliban inflict a crushing defeat on Islamic State-Khurasan, at least in Afghanistan's Jowzjan province. Clashes between the two militant groups started in mid-July and concluded in the first week of August. The Central Asian faction of IS-K suffered more than 250 casualties. ([Pajhwok, July 18, 2018](#)). This faction is led by a mysterious figure, Moavia Uzbeki, who managed to survive the Afghan Taliban onslaught.

Immediately following the proclamation of the Islamic State (IS) caliphate in June 2014, the group announced the establishment of its South Asia chapter in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. IS refers to this chapter as *Waliyat-e-Khurasan* (Khurasan Province). Since then, IS has been able to recruit a number of both veteran and new Islamist militants. A high-level IS delegation also visited the region in November 2014 in order to institutionalize IS-Khurasan (IS-K) ([Dawn, November 12, 2014](#)). IS's then spokesperson, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, also called for Islamist organizations to pledge allegiance to Caliph Ibrahim al-Badri (a.k.a Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi).

Establishing IS-K turned out to be much more difficult than IS-Central had imagined. The nascent Islamist terrorist entity suffered massively as Afghan Taliban, Afghan National Security Forces and U.S. forces (under Operation Resolute Support) all targeted its leadership and

ranks. Four consecutive Emirs of IS-K were either killed in drone strikes or military operations conducted by U.S. and Afghan forces. [1] The U.S. forces also dropped the “Mother of All Bombs” (MOAB) in areas controlled by IS-K in the surroundings of Nangarhar province in eastern Afghanistan ([BBC Asia, April 27, 2017](#)).

Despite these losses, IS-K managed to survive. The group was more resilient than expected, and has been able to recruit in southeastern Afghan provinces and fill its ranks with on-the-run Pakistani Islamist militants from Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The TTP militants were pushed into Afghanistan because of on-going Pakistani military operations in the tribal areas adjacent to the eastern provinces of Afghanistan. While operating in these circumstances, IS-K kept control and survived the onslaught.

Apart from recruiting TTP and other Pakistani Islamist militants, IS-K attracted the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). IMU is one of the two major Uzbek Islamist terrorist groups that have operated in Pakistan and Afghanistan since the commencement of the War on Terror. The group pledged allegiance to IS’s Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2015 and became part of the *Waliyat-e-Khurasan* ([Express Tribune, August 7, 2015](#)). The other group, Islamic Jihad Union, has remained loyal to al-Qaeda.

IS-K started facing difficulties due to the multiple ethnic and regional backgrounds of the many jihadist groups it took under its wing. The organization was further met with the consecutive loss of its leadership and the continuous onslaught of Afghan and Taliban forces. These issues resulted in the emergence of

two offshoots of IS-K on the militant landscape of Afghanistan. One faction includes predominantly Afghans and Pakistanis. It is currently being led by Shaikh Aslam Farooqi and operates in the southeastern provinces of Afghanistan (see [MLM](#), October 4). The other faction, which is far more dangerous, consists of Uzbeks who are former militants of IMU. This more active faction is led by Moavia Uzbeki.

The IS-K faction led by Aslam Farooqi has managed to come to some level of understanding with the Afghan Taliban. This is perhaps because Farooqi is a former member of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a Salafist militant organization based in Pakistan and allegedly considered close to the powerful Pakistani military establishment ([CRPA, December 12, 2017](#)).

On the other hand, the Moavia faction is consistently at war with Afghan Taliban forces. Hitherto, the Moavia faction has kept both the Afghan Taliban and Afghan Security Forces on their toes while inflicting heavy damage on them. As many Afghan militants consider Aslam Farooqi to be close to the Pakistanis and are hesitant to trust him, the Moavia faction has attracted a wide array of jihadists from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and other countries. ([AAN, July 23, 2017](#)) The same faction has been attracting most of the IS militants who turned up in Afghanistan after the fall of Mosul and Raqqa in 2017. [2]

Who is Moavia Khurasani a.k.a Moavia Uzbeki?

Not much is known about Moavia Uzbeki, but we do know he was formerly part of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and later quickly climbed the ranks of IS-K militants to become their Emir in late 2017. [3] He is from Uzbekistan and in his mid-thirties, with some military experience. [4] There are reports that Abdul Rehman Yuldashev, son of IMU founder Tarhir Yuldashev, is also part of Moavia's factions and is running a recruitment drive for IS-K in Sar-e-Pul province in northern Afghanistan. ([VOA, Feb 7, 2017](#))

The name of Moavia Uzbeki first surfaced when a letter drafted and signed by him was obtained by an international news agency correspondent in June 2017. The letter clearly depicted a growing rift between factions of IS-K. It appears that Pakistani and Central Asian militants are pitted against each other. Uzbek fighters, who have long lived in Pakistan's tribal areas before shifting to eastern Afghanistan, seemed unready to trust the Pakistanis in their ranks because they believed some had close ties with Pakistani military and intelligence agencies. Commenting on the links between Aslam Farooqi and Pakistani intelligence, Moavia wrote:

“Even if this information is true, then it's the ISI of Pakistan behind this function and we don't accept it, because we all fight for Allah and his religion..... {against} infidels, intelligence services, and the deceitful behind the scenes” ([Indian Express, June 7, 2017](#)).

A rift reportedly appeared inside the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual IS-K after scores of militants joined it in Afghanistan. Pakistanis in the IS-K wanted to have the upper hand because they were greater in number and relied on Pakistan for supplies and logistics.

Another issue was the consecutive deaths of IS-K Emirs in drone and other operations by U.S. and Afghan forces. In the summer of 2017, the Pakistani faction prevailed and elevated Shaikh Aslam Farooqi, a former LeT commander, as the new Emir of IS-K. The Uzbek and Central Asians felt neglected, given that they had been in Afghanistan much longer than the Pakistanis (who only moved to eastern Afghanistan after the commencement of military operations against TTP and its factions in 2014), and left the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda Central to join with the newly-formed IS-K.

Their decision of join IS-K has also brought down on it the wrath of the Afghan Taliban, who systematically operated against former IMU militants and destroyed their bases and hideouts in central and northern Afghanistan. The Central Asian militants included Uzbek, Tajiks, Kazakhs, Uigher and Chechens, who had rejected the decision of IS-K's central shura and formed their own faction while remaining part of IS-K. They alleged Aslam Farooqi was an “agent of Pakistani intelligence agencies” and made other accusations against him for being close to the Pakistanis. [5] Some of these allegations apparently seemed real, as IS-K Farooqi factions have since then greatly improved their ties with the Afghan Taliban (which is close to the Pakistanis) and are also receiving support from the nearby Pakistani

tribal districts. The IS-K (Farooqi faction) has also shunned terrorist strikes inside Pakistan.

According to recent reports, the Moavia faction finally yielded to the pressure of IS-K shura and agreed to mend fences with IS-K's Farooqi faction after a 10-month long deadlock. Both factions have since then stopped fighting but continue to operate in their respective areas. The Farooqi faction operates in eastern and southeastern Afghan provinces, and Moavia remains in the northern provinces of Afghanistan.

Areas of Operations and Tactics

Terrorist organizations have to muster resources and arrange finances for their day-to-day functioning and to pay for operational expenses. IS-K has been quite successful in this connection, as the Moavia-led faction operates in areas full of natural resources, such as minerals and gemstones. Moreover, taxes are being collected from farmers and a toll is in effect for transporters. IS-K has collected \$15 million in taxes and voluntary contributions since 2017 ([CPRA, Sep 11, 2018](#)).

Moavia operates in the northeastern provinces of Afghanistan, including Jawzjan, Sar-e-Pul, Badakhshan and Thakar. The Afghan Taliban forces are the primary enemy of IS-K. Initially after the merger of IMU and IS-K, IS-K executed a number of Afghan Taliban commanders and pro-Afghan Taliban village elders. More recently, the Afghan Taliban has launched an onslaught against the Moavia faction of IS-K. In one recent battle between the

two in Jawzjan province, Afghan Taliban forces routed Moavia's forces, claiming to have killed 150 of his fighters. The IS-K contingent in the districted was estimated to be around 600 strong, and 250, along with their families, surrendered to Afghan Security Forces ([LWJ, Nov 2, 2018](#)). Moavia has managed to survive. According to Afghan Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid, "the evil phenomenon of Daesh has completely been eliminated and people have been freed from its tortures in Jawzajn province of Afghanistan." Moreover, he claims that another 130 IS-K fighters were captured by Afghan Taliban forces (only to be killed later), whereas other on-the-run IS-K militants surrendered to Afghan National Security Forces ([Reuters, Aug 1, 2018](#)). [6]

Conclusion

Moavia is considered to be the hardest and most ruthless of the IS-K commanders, and a number of Afghan Taliban fighters and commanders were massacred by his militant fighters on his orders. He leads a faction of IS that appears uncompromising and anti-revisionist in implementing IS tactics in Afghanistan. It is to his credit that he has hitherto remained a shadowy and elusive figure, with unmatched notoriety in the militant landscape of Afghanistan. He will likely receive more recruits, as IS-Central is losing its territories in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen at a fast rate. His faction is already a rendezvous point for Central Asian and Chechen jihadists. Moavia has been successful in recruiting on-the-run foreign Islamist militants. His against-everyone approach would also allow him to recruit hardcore uncompromising Takfiri jihadists from all over

the world who are trying to find refuge in ungoverned parts of Afghanistan.

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Notes

[1] Hafiz Saeed Orakzai (killed July 2016), Abdul Haseeb Lgari (killed April 2017), Abdul Sayed Bajuari (killed July 2017) and Abu Saad Erhabi (killed Aug 2018)

[2] Discussions with an Islamabad based senior journalist, in Oct 18, 2018.

[3] Discussions with Mohammad Amir Rana, Director of Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, in Islamabad on Oct 20, 2018.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Discussions with a senior security official in Islamabad, Oct 26, 2018.

[6] Telephone discussions with Abdul Basit, researcher at National University of Singapore, on Oct 21, 2018.

Turkey's Man in Syria—Sayf Boulad Abu Bakr

Nicholas Heras

In late October, Turkish military forces conducted a series of cross-border artillery strikes against the positions of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition in and around the northeastern Syrian city of Kobani ([Kurdistan 24](#) [Erbil], November 9; [The National](#) [Abu Dhabi], October 31). Turkish forces particularly targeted the Kurdish-majority People's Protection Units (YPG), which is a core component of the SDF. Turkey believes the YPG is an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and seeks their removal from all the areas in Syria along its southern border ([Rudaw](#) [Erbil], October 28).

The United States intervened to prevent further conflict between Turkey and the SDF by conducting joint patrols with the SDF in the areas east of the Euphrates, and by announcing that the U.S. military will establish observation posts along the Turkish-Syrian border ([Kurdistan 24](#) [Erbil], November 5; [Reuters](#), November 2). Despite this, tensions between Turkey and the SDF remain high. To support Turkey's efforts against the SDF, a prominent Turkish-backed Syrian armed opposition leader, Sayf Boulad Abu Bakr, announced that his organization—Firqa al-Hamza (Hamza Division)—was training fighters for the campaign against the SDF in the areas of Syria along the Turkish-Syrian border that are east of the Euphrates ([Daily Sabah](#) [Istanbul], November 17; [TRT Haber](#) [Istanbul], November 17; [Sabah](#) [Istanbul], November 11).

The Commander of Firqa al-Hamza— Sayf Boulad Abu Bakr

Sayf Boulad Abu Bakr, 30, is one of the fastest rising power brokers within the Syrian armed opposition movement, and a commander who enjoys the strong patronage of Turkey. He is an ethnic Turkmen from the farming village of Bza'ah in the district of the important market town of al-Bab, which is located 25 miles northeast of the city of Aleppo. [1] Before he emerged as the commander of Firqa al-Hamza in April 2016, Sayf Abu Bakr's personal history and role in the Syrian opposition movement is both mysterious and controversial.

After the start of the armed uprising against the Assad government in the region of al-Bab in 2012, Sayf Abu Bakr is believed to have been a gunman working for a local armed group connected to Liwa al-Tawhid (Unity of God Brigade). [2] The group was emerging at that time as the most prominent armed opposition umbrella organization in the areas around Aleppo. Sayf Abu Bakr also reportedly fought with a Liwa al-Tawhid affiliate in the armed opposition's campaign to seize the city of Aleppo, which began in the summer of 2012. In the course of that fighting, that affiliate was also associated with one of the more prominent groups that sought to control the Old City district of Aleppo, Katiba Halab al-Madina (Aleppo City Brigade). [3]

Sometime in late 2013, when Islamic State (IS) began to emerge as a powerful actor in the region of al-Bab, Sayf Abu Bakr and members of his family mobilized a group of fighters that then joined IS. He subsequently became an

important aide to the IS chief responsible for al-Bab and the surrounding region. [4] Sayf Abu Bakr's responsibilities reportedly included serving as the liaison between IS and other armed opposition organizations in the region of al-Bab, and facilitating arms transfers to IS. [5] Although it is unclear if Sayf Abu Bakr joined IS out of a sense of personal support for the organization's ideology and goals, or for financial reasons, during his time working with IS the group consolidated its power and control over al-Bab and incorporated the region into its Caliphate. Sayf Abu Bakr's responsibilities for IS during that period significantly contributed to the consolidation of IS's influence and authority in the region of al-Bab. [6] He reportedly continued in this role until sometime in the middle of 2014, at which point he and members of his family are believed to have defected from IS and fled for a time to Turkey. It is also rumored that at some point in his work with IS between 2013-2014, he became an asset for Turkish intelligence through the Syrian armed opposition. [7]

After he defected from IS, Sayf Abu Bakr remained relatively inconspicuous until his emergence as the leader of Firqa al-Hamza in April 2016. [8] By late 2014, he had reportedly returned to Syria from Turkey and had emerged as a sub-commander of a constituent group of the Harakat Hazm coalition that was based in the city of Aleppo. Harakat Hazm was a U.S. and Turkish-backed organization, and some of its constituent groups were vetted by the CIA to receive BGM-71 TOW anti-tank missiles ([YouTube](#), November 27, 2014). At that time these missiles were the most sophisticated

weapons that the Syrian armed opposition had received from the United States. Although it is unclear if Sayf Abu Bakr's specific group within the Harakat Hazm organization received TOWs, he led Harakat Hazm fighters in a large armed opposition campaign to seize the area of the Industrial City and Handarat, a strategic area in the northwest suburbs of Aleppo ([YouTube](#), November 27, 2014; [YouTube](#), November 27, 2014).

Following this campaign working with Harakat Hazm, Sayf Abu Bakr's role in the armed opposition is murky—although he reportedly traveled frequently between Aleppo city; armed opposition-controlled front lines against IS northeast of the city of Aleppo; and Turkey, throughout 2015. [9] Syrian opposition sources also assert that during this time period Sayf Abu Bakr was invited by the Turks to participate in the U.S. military's Train and Equip program. [10] The program was intended to develop a local Syrian partner force to fight exclusively against IS, and for which the Turks typically sought out Syrian Turkmen fighters. [11] While there is no conclusive evidence that Sayf Abu Bakr participated in the U.S. military's Train and Equip program, he reappeared as a sub-commander with the Liwa al-Hamza group, which would become the foundation of the Firqa al-Hamza coalition, in January 2016 ([YouTube](#), January 11, 2016). The organization received some support from the U.S. military. [12] Although he was not a prominent commander with Liwa al-Hamza before 2016, Sayf Abu Bakr reportedly had been affiliated with that group prior to that time and had been recruiting for it in the city of Aleppo. [13]

At the time of Sayf Abu Bakr's emergence as a sub-commander within Liwa al-Hamza, the group was preparing to participate in a Turkish and American-backed Hawar Kilis Operations Room, an alliance of armed opposition groups that were going to campaign against IS in the region north and east of Aleppo ([Radio al-Kul \[Idlib\]](#), October 11, 2017; [YouTube](#), August 17, 2016; [YouTube](#), April 3, 2016). Until the death of Liwa al-Hamza's commander Yasser Abu Shaykh in battle in early 2016, and Sayf Abu Bakr's subsequent promotion to commander of Liwa al-Hamza, he was not prominently featured in the organization's media productions ([YouTube](#), April 9, 2016; [YouTube](#), April 8, 2016). Once he took over the leadership of Liwa al-Hamza, and subsequently Firqa al-Hamza, in April 2016, Sayf Abu Bakr developed a "special forces" corps within the Firqa al-Hamza organization that became the group's most important combatant force ([YouTube](#), March 17; [YouTube](#), February 23, 2017; [YouTube](#), August 27, 2016).

As this special forces corps fought battles—supported by Turkey—against IS and forced the group to withdraw from territory, Sayf Abu Bakr slowly became a prominent public face of the Turkish-backed Syrian armed opposition campaign against the Islamic State ([YouTube](#), November 13, 2016; [YouTube](#), August 24, 2016). His role as a public spokesman for the Turkish-backed anti-IS rebels really gathered steam during the Euphrates Shield operation that was launched in August 2016, and he was featured particularly prominently during the extension of the Euphrates Shield operation that sought to capture the region of al-Bab ([YouTube](#), March

30, 2017; [YouTube](#), February 13, 2017; [YouTube](#), February 8, 2017). After al-Bab and its surrounding area was conquered from IS in March 2017, Sayf Abu Bakr was made the de facto military governor of the al-Bab region by the Turks, a position that he holds at the present time. [14]

Roots of Sayf Abu Bakr—From Syrian Fighter to Turkish Proxy

In the subsequent year and a half since the capture of the region of al-Bab, Sayf Abu Bakr has consolidated his authority over the al-Bab region with the active support of Turkey. The opposition-led Syrian Interim Government (SIG), and its subordinate force, the Syrian National Army (SNA), maintain a military college in al-Bab for training armed opposition forces for internal security of the Turkish zone of control in northwest Syria ([Enab Baladi](#) [Al-Bab], August 6; [Smart News Agency](#) [Al-Bab], November 1, 2017 ; see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), November 5). This training includes a large contingent of Turkmen—which is protected by Firqa al-Hamza under the supervision of Sayf Abu Bakr. Firqa al-Hamza has formally been designated the “Second Division of the Second Legion,” within the SNA’s military structure ([YouTube](#), [Twitter](#)) . [15]

Sayf Abu Bakr, as a Turkmen commander, is provided with a special status in the hierarchy of the Turkish-backed armed opposition in the Turkish zone of control in northwest Syria. [16] This gives him greater authority than most Arab armed opposition leaders within the Syrian National Army, even though his force is

technically subordinate to it. [17] The Turkish media consistently refers to him as a “Turkmen commander” to designate his special status within the armed opposition ([Yeni Safak](#) [Istanbul], February 10; [Anadolu Gazette](#) [Ankara], February 9). Turkish military support has also been useful for Sayf Abu Bakr in quelling unrest amongst the local population within al-Bab against the Firqa al-Hamza and allied armed opposition groups ([Yeni Safak](#) [Istanbul], May 8). This is especially true because his brother Hamad—whom he gave authority to manage the day-to-day administration of the city of al-Bab—developed a reputation for corruption and brutality that led to protests against Firqa al-Hamza in May 2018 ([Aleppo 24](#) [Al-Bab], May 5; [Enab Baladi](#) [Al-Bab], May 5). They were only stopped by Turkish military intervention.

Sayf Abu Bakr has gained considerable prominence during 2018 for his role in the Turkish-led Operation Olive Branch that was conducted against the formerly SDF-controlled ethnic Kurdish majority region of Afrin, which borders Turkey in northwest Syria ([YouTube](#), March 19; [YouTube](#), March 18; [YouTube](#), February 28). Under his command, the special forces corps of Firqa al-Hamza was one of the major Syrian armed opposition groups that participated alongside the Turkish military in the campaign to conquer Afrin ([YouTube](#), March 10; [YouTube](#), March 1). Sayf Abu Bakr reportedly was given the personal authority to recruit fighters for the Afrin operation, authority which Syrian opposition sources assert came with a written statement from the Turkish president’s office [18].

His close association with Turkey—and his Turkmen ethnic background—were well noted by the Turkish press in its coverage of Operation Olive Branch. Turkish media not only frequently referred to him as a "Turkmen commander," but referred to his special forces branch of Firqa al-Hamza as a "Turkmen force" ([TRT Haber](#) [Istanbul], November 17; [Sabah](#), March 3; [Sabah](#) [Istanbul], March 1). Sayf Abu Bakr's role in the Afrin campaign—and the presence of the special forces branch of Firqa al-Hamza in Afrin in the aftermath of Operation Olive Branch—have increased ethnic tensions in northwest Syria and indicate the extent to which the Turkish military favors Turkmen armed opposition forces as local partners. He was reportedly rewarded for his efforts in Afrin with a personal audience with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. [19] Firqa al-Hamza has subsequently been closely associated with potential Turkish-planned military operations in Idlib and in the areas controlled by the SDF east of the Euphrates River. The group is also involved in the training of Syrian armed opposition fighters for operations there ([Anadolu Agency](#) [Ankara], November 17; [TRT Haber](#) [Istanbul], August 7).

Sayf Abu Bakr's curious case demonstrates the fluidity of the Syrian armed opposition, and the decisive role that Turkey has played in the development and survival of the armed opposition in northern Syria. His personal story also demonstrates the power of Turkey's long game in northern Syria, where it has cultivated different local commanders to be its assets within the armed opposition. Sayf Abu Bakr is one of the most important Syrian opposition commanders directly supported by the Turkish

military, and there is a definite sense within the opposition movement that despite his seemingly low rank in the hierarchy of the Syrian National Army, he is being elevated within its structure through the patronage of Turkey.

Conclusion

Sayf Abu Bakr's rising status as a powerbroker among the small group of ethnic Turkmen armed opposition leaders favored by Turkey and willingness to serve as its local Syrian partners provides him with significant authority within the Turkish zone of control in northwest Syria. His role as the de facto military governor of the region of al-Bab—which is in the strategic eastern flank of Turkey's zone of control in northern Syria—places him in a powerful position that provides him with the opportunity to further develop his influence within the Syrian armed opposition. Further, under Sayf Abu Bakr's leadership Firqa al-Hamza has specifically become a preferred partner force for Turkey, and his group is now a mechanism for Turkey to recruit, train, and mobilize a security force for its zone of control in northern Syria. As a result of these conditions, Sayf Ab Bakr is likely to remain a key local figure in directing the process through which Turkey establishes permanent structures of administration and control in northern Syria.

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Notes

[1] Author's interviews with a prominent Syrian opposition commander who has spent the majority of the Syrian civil war recruiting and

mobilizing opposition fighters, especially against the Islamic State. This interviewee has personal knowledge of Sayf Boulad Abu Bakr's background story through his work. Interviews conducted on November 27-29, 2018.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

Pragmatism, Business, Flexibility: A Profile of Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade Leader Haithem al-Tajouri

Dario Cristiani

Introduction

In recent years, the role of Libya's local militias—which emerged immediately after the eruption of the revolution in 2011—grew exponentially. Created in many cases as revolutionary or neighborhood defense groups, their economic power and territorial presence have increased sharply over the years, particularly after 2015. In Tripoli, local militias started working together in 2014 to dislodge militias from Misrata and Zintan that were fighting for the control of the capital. Among them, the Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade led by Haitham al-Tajouri (also spelled Haytem Tajouri/Tajuri in some Western media reports) is one of the most important. Al-Tajouri is one of the most crucial militia leaders in Libya given his economic power, military strength and territorial control.

The Rise of al-Tajouri and the TRB

Al-Tajouri leads the Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade (TRB), also known as the First Security Division of the Central General Security Administration (CGSA). The TRB's headquarters is in al-Shat, in the area of Abu Sittah near the Tripoli Corniche. The information on al-Tajouri's private life—particularly before the revolution—is not particularly significant. He was born in Tajoura in 1985, and, according to Western sources, was

reportedly a low-ranking police officer before the revolution ([Small Arms Survey, Pg. 79](#), October, 2014). However, some Libyan sources suggest he worked as a taxi driver before crossing the path of Qadhafi's family. In 2005, he met a girl while working as a bodyguard for Muammar Qadhafi and began training in the navy, becoming a second lieutenant. In 2009, he tried to marry this girl, but she happened to be the mistress of Muatassim Qadhafi, one of the Libyan dictator's sons. Al-Tajouri was arrested and held in prison for six months on charges of drug consumption ([Akhbar Libya 24 \[Benghazi\]](#), Oct 20). He was freed thanks to the intervention of then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Musa Kusa, who had family links to al-Tajouri. Kusa would later flee the revolution by defecting to Great Britain.

After the outbreak of the revolution, al-Tajouri fled Libya, moving to Tunisia, before returning to Libya to join the brigade led by the controversial Irish-Libyan leader Mahdi al-Harati. However, he soon created his own group, the Martyrs of Tajoura. Al-Tajouri was able to conclude a deal with the former regime, after smuggling Qadhafi's son Mohammed out of Libya for about 10 million dinars. He used this money to attract young fighters, strengthening his position and later becoming the leader of the TRB ([Akhbar Libya 24 \[Benghazi\]](#), Oct 20).

A Non-Ideological Leader

Al-Tajouri is not an ideological militia leader. He once declared himself in favor of restoring the monarchy, but never elaborated on this position ([Libya Herald](#), August 14, 2016). On his social media pages, he often makes reference to religion, but he is not a classic Islamist leader.

The same can be said for his brigade, the TRB. Despite having a number of Islamists in its ranks, the group cannot be considered an Islamist-oriented militia, unlike two other prominent militias allied with the TRB—the so-called Rada (Special Deterrence Forces) and the Nawasi Brigade. Together with the Abu Salim Central Security headed by Abdul-Ghani Al-Kikli (aka Ghneiwa), these forces represent the backbone of security in Tripoli and work in support of the GNA. According to a number of reports from Libya, one of al-Tajouri's clear ideological characteristics is his aversion to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Libya ([Libya Herald](#), August 14, 2016). Back in 2016, he allegedly wanted to arrest the Grand Mufti of Libya, Sheikh Sadek Ghariani, head of the Dar Al-Ifta and considered close to the MB ([Al-Wasat](#), August 14, [Libya Herald](#), August 16). However, it is likely that these problems were more the result of a clash of interests between al-Tajouri and the MB-aligned groups for the control of Tripoli, rather than a dispute based on ideological elements. In any case, these anti-MB credentials made al-Tajouri an interesting prospect for a number of external powers seeking to strengthen their presence in Tripoli, as will be explained later in this article.

One significant characteristic of al-Tajouri and his brigade is their considerable involvement in Tripoli's local economy. The prevailing view in the city, and in some Libyan diaspora groups in Tunis, is that he used his political and security role in Tripoli to build an economic empire based on intimidation, foreign exchange fraud and extortion. He has been described as the "biggest thug" in town, who began hijacking

banks in 2013. In 2017, the UN-appointed Panel of Experts on Libya released a report suggesting that al-Tajouri and a number of his business associates were granted around \$20 million in fraudulent bank guarantees for imports in 2015. Others suggest that he and his men control around 90% of the local banks' branches in Tripoli ([Middle East Eye](#), April 10, 2017).

His focus on the economy may explain some of his political moves. He moved closer to Sarraj and the GNA once the economic situation in Libya became unsustainable and the new authorities were threatening action against his financial interests. He thus started working closely with the GNA. On February 7, 2017, the Director of the Central Security Administration, Omar al-Khadrawi, gave the First Security Division the responsibility of protecting the port of Tripoli ([UN](#), pg. 127, June 1, 2017). The port is an essential asset for anyone doing business in Libya.

The Tripoli Battle and the Mysterious Trip to the UAE

In recent months, al-Tajouri was at the center of many developments that blanketed Libyan headlines. On November 26, Hadi Awainat—a major leader within the TRB—was killed at Mitiga airport after he arrived from Tunis, where he allegedly spent a month together with other members of the militia. Libyan sources suggest that members of the militia associated with al-Tajouri killed Awainat and that al-Tajouri's men later prevented Public Prosecution officials from entering the hospital where the corpse was stored ([Ewan Libya](#), Nov 27, 2018; [Address Libya](#), Nov 27, 2018). Several cases of militia leaders being

killed or wounded have been reported in November 2018, and this important development comes at a time that rumors of rising tensions between the militias working in Tripoli are widespread. In addition, Awainat is believed to have played a major role in the bloody inter-militia conflict that erupted in the Libyan capital at the end of August, and he went to Tunis a few weeks after its end.

This conflict involved the Seventh Brigade from the town of Tarhouna, supported by the forces linked to Salah Badi, and the TRB and the Nawasi (See [MLM](#), October 4). These clashes left around 117 people dead and 581 others wounded, and lasted until the end of September, when the Tripoli Security Directorate announced the end of fighting in the Libyan capital ([Libya Observer](#), September 26; [Libya Observer](#), September 27). Al-Tajouri announced via Facebook he was returning to Libya from his hajj (pilgrimage) in Saudi Arabia because of the clashes ([Al-Motawasat](#), August 27; [Haithem al-Tajouri Facebook Fan Page](#), August 28). However, halfway into the conflict, his social media posts and public appearances grew increasingly rare. From September 10 to November 2, he only posted twice on his Facebook fan page. In that same period, the TRB fan page reduced the number of its posts ([TRB Facebook Fan Page](#)). Arab media sources later gave conflicting accounts of al-Tajouri's presence in the UAE. Some sources simply said that al-Tajouri went to the UAE in a secret trip with Hashim Bishr, a powerful Salafi militia leader, a member of the Rada, and a security advisor to the GNA. According to these sources, the GNA was aware of this trip. Al-Tajouri and

Bishr stayed voluntarily in the UAE and returned with a significant amount of money ([Akhbar Libya](#) 24 [Benghazi], Oct 20). Other sources, however, claimed that al-Tajouri and Bishr were detained in the country and released only by the end of October ([Al-Akhbar](#), October 23).

This was not the first time that al-Tajouri went to the UAE. Back in April 2018, he allegedly spent a few weeks in the country—together with a number of other TRB men—to attend the wedding of the son of the former Libyan ambassador to the UAE. Al-Tajouri has allegedly traveled there a few more times since ([Jana](#), April 10, 2018).

These reports follow others suggesting that al-Tajouri had a crucial role in pushing the National Oil Corporation to sign a contract with a UAE company instead of an Italian one ([Al-Araby](#), August 20). These same sources say that before traveling to Saudi Arabia for the hajj, he also went to speak with Saudi officials who were looking to extend their outreach into Tripoli ([Al-Araby](#), April 15). Against this backdrop, it is also worth highlighting that, in the past, media sources from the UAE accused al-Tajouri of being close to Qatar ([Sky News Arabia](#), 9 June, 2017), while more recently others have pointed to the existence of ongoing cooperation between al-Tajouri's men and Turkey ([The Arab Weekly](#), Nov 21, 2018). Turkey and Qatar are arch-rivals of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the region, and Libya is indeed one of the arenas in which this competition is strongest.

Diversifying Alliances

Although most of these allegations should be taken with a pinch of salt, they suggest that the

situation in Tripoli is evolving. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are among the key supporters of Khalifa Haftar, the leader of the Libyan National Army (LNA), who is considered to be the strongman in eastern Libya. It is likely, however, that his external supporters are trying to diversify their alliances in Libya by strengthening their contacts with militias in Tripoli, as Haftar has failed to strengthen his position in the rest of the country, particularly in the capital. From this point of view, al-Tajouri is considered an interesting potential ally for a number of reasons—his territorial control, his economic power and his non-ideological profile. Other Tripoli-based militias, such as the Nawasi and Rada, have a much stronger Islamist outlook and are also strongly opposed to Haftar. Indeed, in October 2017, the Nawasi clashed with the TRB because of rumors al-Tajouri was going to talk with Haftar. The Nawasi attempted a takeover of al-Tajouri's headquarters in the area of al-Shat ([Libya Herald](#), Oct 2, 2017).

Past developments support the view that al-Tajouri is a very pragmatic militia leader. For instance, Italy approached him when Rome wanted to strengthen Sarraj's position in Tripoli. As noted before, in the early stages of Sarraj's government, al-Tajouri was not particularly supportive of the new arrangement, as he saw it as a potential threat to his position in Tripoli. However, he paid a secret visit to Rome in February 2017, when Ahmed Mateeg, the Misratan who is Sarraj's deputy, was in the Italian capital ([Il Foglio \[Rome\]](#), Feb 10, 2017). After this meeting, al-Tajouri's support for the GNA became much more significant. It is not a coincidence that in the same period he was

granted control of Tripoli's seaport, an essential tool for his business. All these dynamics persuaded him to become part of the broader GNA support network. This shows his opportunistic political approach and how business considerations drive his political choices.

Conclusion

Al-Tajouri is indisputably one of the key figures in the current fragmented Libyan political landscape. His territorial grasp on Tripoli is significant, and his group controls substantial economic and military resources. He is less ideological than other militia leaders in Libya and has shown a considerable degree of tactical flexibility, especially when dealing with foreign actors. While working to strengthen his military position in Tripoli, he is also very focused on growing his business. Al-Tajouri sees boosting his economic resources both as an aim in itself and a tool to further increase his political power. He is a keen rival of the forces linked to Ghwell and Badi—Misratans who had and have an interest in strengthening their positions in Tripoli. Given also the problems that Haftar has had in consolidating his position beyond eastern Libya, external powers like Saudi Arabia and the UAE became increasingly interested in strengthening relations with him. Given the military and economic capacities of his brigade, and his territorial control in Tripoli, al-Tajouri and his militia will remain key actors in the coming years, maintaining significant leverage in Tripoli and the surrounding areas. However, the recent rumors concerning increasing tension within his brigade and among the militias controlling Tripoli suggest that new waves of violence—among groups and people previously allied—is

becoming more and more likely. Al-Tajouri's thirst for wealth and power might push some of his current allies to try isolating him, or to promote a tactical convergence between some of them and his enemies to limit his rise.

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