



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

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AL-BARNAWI VS. SHEKAU—JIHADIST RIVALRIES IN NIGERIA

Jacob Zenn

In August 2016, the Islamic State designated Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi as the new leader of its Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) ([Jihadology](#), August 3, 2016). Abubakar Shekau, in turn, was dropped from that position, leading him to revive *Jamā'at Ahl al-Sunnah li-l-Da'wah wa-l-Jihād* (commonly referred to as Boko Haram), which had been dormant since 2014. Prior to the “promotion” of al-Barnawi, Mamman Nur, a longtime group member who has significant jihadist connections abroad, and Abu Fatima, a top battlefield commander, delivered sermons to their fighters decrying Shekau’s excessive brutality, unpredictability and failure to abide by the Islamic State's orders ([Sahara Reporters](#), August 5, 2016). It was only after their sermons that the Islamic State finally announced the leadership change from Shekau to al-Barnawi, suggesting the two events were connected.

Two years later, however, Nur fell out of the Islamic State’s favor and the group ordered ISWAP commanders to kill him, which occurred in September ([Daily Trust](#), September 14). The apparent proximate reason for ordering the purge of Nur was that the Islamic State suspected Nur received some payments on the side when ISWAP released around 100 Muslim schoolgirls kidnapped from Dapchi back to their villages, even though Islamic State approved the return itself ([Vanguard](#), March 24). More broadly, however, Nur—with his former al-Qaeda relationships—seems to have been insufficiently loyal to the Islamic State, at least compared to other hardliners in ISWAP.

These changes in ISWAP—namely the purge of Nur and its apparent hardline turn—leave Abu Mus’ab al-Barnawi somewhat weaker than he was at the time of his promotion in August 2016. At the same time, Abubakar Shekau reappeared in a video from his faction in November for the first time since July ([Pulse.ng](#), November 9). Since then, his faction has released several videos

showing attacks on military barracks and reiterating the group's ideology and continued support for the Islamic State despite not formally being in the organization ([Jihadology](#), November 9). Moreover, these videos emulate the Islamic State's style to such an extent that it seems some of the group's members are either overlooking these "copyright infringements," or, perhaps more likely, they are collaborating with Shekau's faction on media, if not other areas ([Jihadology](#), November 9).

What does this mean? There could yet be another factional realignment between ISWAP and Shekau's faction, pitting Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi against his rival, Shekau. If this is the case, the key question is where will ISWAP's hardliners stand—with al-Barnawi or Shekau?

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The Saudi's Man in Sa'dah: Hadi Tarshan Abdullah Tarshan al-Waeli

Nicholas A. Heras

Despite the United Nations-backed peace talks to end the war in Yemen—which recently concluded in Stockholm, Sweden—the Saudi-led international coalition continues to conduct a campaign to capture the northwest Yemeni governorate of Sa'dah, on the Yemeni-Saudi border, from the Ansar Allah (Partisans of God, a.k.a. Houthis) movement ([al-Arabiyya](#) [Dubai], December 16; [al-Jazeera](#) [Doha], December 7; [Sky News Arabia](#) [Abu Dhabi], December 3). These combat operations are primarily being conducted by the coalition through the support of local Yemeni militias that are loyal to the Saudi-backed government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Overseeing these coalition-backed combat operations is Major General Sheikh Hadi Tarshan Abdullah Tarshan al-Waeli, who since August 2016 is the Hadi-appointed governor of Sa'dah governorate and the official chief of the local Yemeni military forces that are backed by the Saudi-led coalition in the campaign to capture Sa'dah governorate from the Houthis ([Okaz](#) [Riyadh], November 10; [YouTube](#), August 1; [Mareb Press](#), August 22, 2016).

Tarshan, 50, is a native of the al-Safra' district of Sa'dah governorate, which is located in the central part of the governorate and lies on the approach to the governorate's major eponymous city of Sa'dah, the traditional stronghold of the Houthi movement ([Hunaradaa](#) [Sa'dah], August

22, 2016). He is also a prominent member of a sheikhly lineage within the Waela tribe, a large tribe that is located in different areas of Yemen, and in southwest Saudi Arabia, but is particularly concentrated and powerful in Sa'dah governorate ([al-Jazirah](#) [Riyadh], March 3, 2017). The Waela are a multi-sectarian tribe (Zaydi Shia, Ismaili Shia, and Sunni), and Tarshan is from a Sunni branch of the tribe which is closely associated with the Yemen's powerful Salafist movement ([al-Raheed](#) [Sana'a], March 14, 2014; [Akhbar al-Yom](#) [Sana'a], February 4, 2013; [al-Jazeera](#) [Doha], January 12, 2012).

The Waela tribe, as a whole, has had a difficult relationship with the Houthi movement, and there have been periodic clashes between Waela tribesmen and Houthi fighters over the last decade ([al-Bayan](#) [Dubai], October 18, 2016; [al-Watan](#) [Riyadh], December 15, 2010; [Mareb Press](#), January 21, 2006). In his role as the military commander of the local Yemeni partner forces of the Saudi-led coalition, Tarshan has put particular emphasis on recruiting, training, and mobilizing fighters from the Waela tribe to participate in operations against the Houthis ([al-Sahwa Yemen](#) [Sa'dah], March 14, 2017; [al-Jazirah](#) [Riyadh], March 3, 2017). Tarshan represents the Waela as the spokesman of the "Forum of the Sons of Sa'dah Governorate," and as the secretary-general of the "Bloc of Elders of Sa'dah Governorate," both of which are Saudi-led coalition backed efforts to create social and political space to contest the Houthi movement's rule over Sa'dah ([Hunaradaa](#) [Sa'dah], August 22, 2016).

Significantly, although he has been given a high military rank by Hadi's government and the Saudi-led coalition, Tarshan does not have a military background. Instead, he has risen to prominence through politics, as over the course of his career he has served in different roles in the Yemeni government, starting his career in Yemen's Ministry of Education ([Hunaradaa](#) [Sa'dah], August 22, 2016). Prior to his appointment as governor of Sa'dah governorate by Hadi in August, Tarshan served as Hadi's Assistant Secretary for Political Affairs ([Hunaradaa](#) [Sa'dah], August 22, 2016). This was a position that allowed him to serve as the interface between the Saudi-led coalition and local Yemeni forces in central and northern Yemen that supported the Hadi government. It put him on Saudi Arabia's radar as a local leader in Sa'dah that could be empowered by the coalition.

Tarshan became an important figure in the Sa'dah governorate branch of the Islah Party, which is the Yemen affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood, and which is a political movement that in Yemen receives the patronage of Saudi Arabia. He continues to be connected to the movement by serving as the head of its Social Department ([Mareb Press](#), August 22, 2016; [al-Raheed](#) [Sana'a], March 14, 2014; [Akhbar al-Yom](#) [Sana'a], February 4, 2013).

In the tumultuous period after Yemen's former president Ali Abdullah Saleh left office in early 2012 and prior to the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in October 2014, Tarshan was a member of the National Dialogue effort to create a post-Saleh Yemeni constitution and government. He contributed to the subsequent international

efforts to support the National Dialogue ([YouTube](#), February 12; [Hunaradaa](#) [Sa'dah], August 22, 2016). It was during this time period that Tarshan emerged as a vocal critic of the Houthi movement, due to the Houthi dominance over Sa'dah governorate, its antagonistic role in the National Dialogue process, and its conflict with the Waela ([YouTube](#), February 12; [Yemen Press](#) [Sana'a] January 15, 2014; [YouTube](#), November 4, 2013; [Akhbar al-Yom](#) [Sana'a], February 4, 2013). Tarshan was appointed the governor of Sa'dah governorate by Hadi in August 2016, and shortly thereafter he began making significant public appearances in both Arab media and in coalition-controlled areas of Sa'dah governorate ([YouTube](#), June 25; [YouTube](#), May 31; [YouTube](#), April 29; [YouTube](#), January 13). He is featured particularly prominently in his day-to-day capacity as a military chief and his role overseeing the war effort in Sa'dah governorate ([YouTube](#), January 18, 2018; [Facebook](#), December 27, 2017; [Yemen Voice](#) [Sa'dah], November 11, 2017; [YouTube](#), January 25, 2017).

Tarshan's history in the Yemeni civil war represents an interesting example of the challenges facing Saudi Arabia's effort to build an alternate power structure to the Houthis in northern Yemen. Tarshan's influence within the Waela tribe—which Saudi Arabia has enhanced by fully backing him—is important because the Waela provide a locally powerful socio-political force in Sa'dah that can be activated to serve as Tarshan's enforcers. The Waela's contentious relationship with the Houthis, which has featured significant bouts of conflict between the tribe

and the Houthi movement, also provides him, and Saudi Arabia, with a pool of tribal gunmen who have a vested interest in repressing Houthi activities in Sa'dah. Ultimately, Tarshan's role in the Saudi-backed coalition effort in Sa'dah governorate is not so much as a military commander as it is to present a ready-made “son of Sa'dah” who is willing and able to step in and lead a local security and governance structure in the wake of the Houthis.

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Shaykh Mukhtar Robow Ali Revisited: From Repentant Jihadist to New Enemy of the Somali Government

Sunguta West

Shaykh Mukhtar Robow Ali—a.k.a Abu Mansur (Mansoor)—a former deputy leader of al-Shabaab, has fallen-out with the Somalia government, barely a year after his defection from the al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa.

Robow, who switched his allegiance in August last year, was arrested on December 13 in the city of Baidoa, about 240 kilometers southwest of Mogadishu, following violent protests by his supporters. According to news reports, the leader was beaten and taken to the Somali capital, Mogadishu, where he is still detained ([Citizen Digital](#), December 14).

Events before the arrest indicate the government's growing discomfort with the former jihadist. In October, the government banned Robow from holding public office for allegedly being a security threat to Somalia. Senior government officials indicated that although Robow had abandoned the militant group, Interpol had placed restrictions on his movement. Somalia's Internal Security Ministry accused the leader of bringing al-Shabaab militants and weapons to Baidoa, capital of the South West state. ([The Standard](#), December 16).

A year ago, his defection was touted by the Somalia government as a breakthrough in the battle against al-Shabaab. At the time, security and intelligence officials observed that if the

defection was well handled, it could help bring more militants to the government's side and act as a good source of intelligence on al-Shabaab's operations ([Citizen Digital](#), November 28).

A former veteran of the war in Afghanistan and a founder of al-Shabaab, Robow had been in a good standing with the government, until he announced that he would contest the South West state's regional presidency.

Disturbed by his move, the government moved to stop Robow from running for the post and began running its own candidate for the position. The regional electoral commission then cleared Robow to run, after which the government arrested him on December 13 ([The Star](#), November 2).

Despite calls for his release and postponement of the elections, the South West state elections took place on December 19. The government's candidate won the election, which is one of the elections being held in Somalia's seven states. The aim of the elections is to spread power among the country's multiple clans, in an attempt to end its long-running conflict. With the dispersion of power, the states are required to be independent and have the ability to elect their own representatives.

Security analysts are concerned, however, that the ban on Robow and the visible meddling in the South West state elections could ignite further violence and instability in the region. News reports suggest that Ethiopian troops in Somalia were involved in the arrest. That could mean more tensions between the people of Somalia and Ethiopia, two countries which have

had an unpredictable history ([Goobjoog News](#), December 13).

Robow's arrest had sparked a three-day violent protest in Baidoa, which left at least 11 dead, including a local legislator. A government campaign against the leader saw Robow's popularity rise among his Laysan sub-clan, as well as other local clans which considered him a suitable candidate. ([Garowe Online](#), December 12); [The Standard](#), December 14).

When Robow defected, the U.S. government quietly dropped a \$5 million bounty on his head. The bounty had been placed on June 7, 2012, at the peak of al-Shabaab action in the region. The decision to remove it was allegedly made in consultation with the government of President Mohammed Farmajo. According to reports, Robow's name has also been removed from a U.S. list of persons who sponsor terrorism ([Hiiraan Online](#), June 23, 2017).

Robow, 49, served as deputy to Adan Hashi Ayrow, a co-founder and al-Shabaab leader who was killed in a U.S. airstrike in 2008 in the town of Dusamareb. After the leader's death, Robow fell out with Ayrow's successor, Shakyh Ahmed Abdi Godane, and was forced to go into hiding.

In 2010, he moved his forces to the Bay and Bakool region, where he kept a low profile. While he maintained his allegiance to the group, there was speculation that he had defected to the government's side. Other reports indicated that he was considering forming his own jihadist group to be known as al-Islamia ([Relief Web](#), October 4, 2010).

However, on August 13, 2017, he surrendered to Somali forces in the government-controlled town of Hudur in the southwestern region and was airlifted to Mogadishu under tight security. ([Tuko](#), August 16, 2017).

With his latest arrest and detention in Mogadishu, anger has been building among his supporters. Early in December, a public works minister resigned over what he called the government's interference in the affairs of South West state. The minister accused the Mogadishu-based government of suppressing and kidnapping the people of the state ([Hiiraan Online](#), December 16).

Robow's career as a jihadist started during the time of al-Itihad al-Islamiya (AIAI), an armed group formed in the 1980s which sought to establish an Islamic state in Somalia. In 1996, after returning from Khartoum University, where he studied Sharia (Islamic law), he established the group's first militant Islamist training camp in al-Hudda in Huddur Somalia. The AIAI camps were to facilitate the recruitment of new fighters, since the group was suffering heavy losses at the hands of Ethiopian troops ([See Terrorism Monitor](#), January 23, 2015).

In 2000, he reportedly left Somalia to train with the Taliban after being recruited by Shaykh Aden Hashi Ayrow. He returned to Somalia after the Afghan group's fall ([Community Digital News](#), September 2, 2014).

Robow's rise began around 2006, when he gained prominence for leading al-Shabaab's propaganda war against Ethiopian forces and the Somali Transitional government troops in southern Somalia. Robow then became a

commander within al-Shabaab, which was formed in 2003 together with other militant leaders. Al-Shabaab's early leaders were inspired by al-Qaeda's terror network.

When the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) was formed in 2000, al-Shabaab became its military wing by providing the group with hundreds of young trained fighters.

Robow was appointed deputy defense minister of the ICU administration and became al-Shabaab's spokesman when Ethiopian troops overran the ICU administration in 2007.

Soon after the death of Ayrow, Robow's problems began with Godane taking over in 2009 as the al-Shabaab emir. The new leader replaced Robow with Shaykh Ali Mohamud Raage as the militant group's spokesman, a development that did not sit well with the commander.

Godane—also an Afghanistan war veteran—was killed in a U.S. airstrike in September 2014. Before his death, he had adopted an ambitious global jihadist strategy that transformed al-Shabaab from a local terror group into an international one.

The ambitious attempt to change al-Shabaab, however, created a huge ideological and leadership rift within the group, of which Robow was a casualty. Today, he is back in the government's bad books, just as he had been when he was a top leader within al-Shabaab.

Conclusion

The latest arrest of Robow is igniting concerns among security experts that there could be

further violence and instability in Somalia's South West state. Robow's defection had widely been seen as an asset for the Somali government, which is still trying to find a way to defeat al-Shabaab. Keeping him in detention would create both more support for him and a suitable environment for his return to the militant group. Therefore, his immediate release is now paramount, if the government and international supporters are to convince the world that such defections are valuable.

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Emilie König, Mayfa, Zahram Duman—The IS Women Leading The Next Frontier of Women in Jihad

Halla Diyab

With the dream of a Caliphate coming to an ignominious end, and Islamic State (IS) insurgents either being killed or fleeing from Syria and Iraq, female jihadists have been subjected to prosecution and captivity. As an increasing number of European women publicly plead for repatriation, a new form of female militancy is taking shape. With the loss of their male jihadist peers, the female militants are carving out a new role for women within the ranks of their group. These new roles will operate on jihadist sisterhood based on what these female jihadists have shared from the Caliphate's fall—namely cruelty, imprisonment, separation, and the loss of male counterparts. These female jihadists feel betrayed by the failure of the Caliphate to sustain the jihadist ideology's territory or protect its soldiers. They have developed a sense of separation from their male peers and are growing out of the conventional role for female jihadists, as they no longer need male peers to connect them to the jihadist cause. This does not mean they will think less of the jihadist ideology—rather, they will endeavor to restructure this ideology and feminize it. This process will pose a danger to the societies to which they are returning.

Emilie König: The Threat of Wannabe-Returning Foreign Female Jihadists

The militants who hold extreme views and were radicalized before leaving to fight in Syria or Iraq pose a growing threat after returning to Europe. An example of this is Emilie König (a.k.a. Umm al-Tawab), the French nightclub bartender turned notorious IS recruiter ([Alhurra](#), January 9). The 33-year-old jihadist and mother of three was arrested by Kurdish forces after she joined IS in 2012. König—who is considered one of the most dangerous French female jihadists on the UN blacklist and the U.S. list of foreign terrorists—was born to a Catholic former police officer who left her and her mother at the age of two. At 19, König left home only to return after converting to Islam under the influence of her first husband, “Ismail,” an Algerian drug trafficker who was serving his sentence in prison. He abused König until he was jailed again for domestic violence. König—who chose to be known as “Um al-Tawab,” which means repentance in Arabic—apparently regretted her time working as a bartender in a Lorient nightclub during her teens. König fled from her first husband to Paris in 2011, and began wearing a niqab (or burka). She found in Islam a way to rebel against her society, in which she failed to fit. She was later stopped by local police in 2010 near a mosque in Lorraine for distributing flyers calling for jihad ([Alqabas](#), May 12, 2016).

She became associated with the extremist group Forsane Alizza, whose leader was jailed in 2015 on terrorism charges. König was the first French woman to cross the Turkish borders and join IS in the summer of 2012, leaving her children behind ([Albayan](#), January 3, 2016). She then married a French jihadist, Ibrahim (a.k.a. Abu

Muhammed), who died shortly after their marriage, leaving her with three children. König played an active role as a prominent recruiter of wannabe-jihadists. She is believed to have assisted in recruiting more than 200 French women. König was not the conventional militant, but rather belonged to a wave of visible insurgents featured in a series of YouTube videos wearing niqabs and carrying their firearms, yelling “Allah Akbar” ([Youtube](#), August 9, 2016). König is now held by Kurdish forces in al-Hawla, in eastern Syria, and is attempting to return to Paris. Although she stated in several interviews that she was tortured while under arrest, she later denied it in a video interview published by the Kurdish militant group, the People's Protection Units (YPG) ([Almasdar](#), January 10). In the interview, she appeared exhausted and did not wear a niqab or head scarf ([Arabian Business](#), January 9).

A militant like König, who has been a follower of these extreme beliefs since her teens, will not be de-radicalized by the loss of the Caliphate's territory. Her extremism began before she left for jihad in Syria and it found a place to grow by joining the group where her jihadism evolved from an ideology to active violence. König despised democracy and passionately enticed others to join the terrorist groups for years before she was captured. Showing regret for joining the group is insufficient evidence that she has renounced the extremist ideology. Rather, she is likely trying to gain sympathy so she can be released from captivity and return to France.

König's active jihadism is further defined by appearing in her captivity videos without a headscarf. This was done to camouflage her

rhetoric and give the false impression that she no longer holds extreme views. But this pattern can also be seen not just as belief in the terrorist cause, but using the extreme ideology to rebel against French society, which she deeply resents. König's trajectory and past actions demonstrate her ability to operate on her own within the jihadist movement. She operated without a male figure to connect her to the jihadist cause, and does not need a husband, a son, or even a leader to encourage her extremist activities, and herein lies the danger.

Mayfa: IS Matchmaker

Another prominent case is that of the 21-year-old French woman known simply as “Mayfa” (a.k.a Umm al-Zahraa). She was an IS matchmaker who persuaded young girls to travel to Syria in order to marry IS fighters ([Alsumaria](#), September 29, 2015). She started a travel agency as a cover for her recruiting French girls. Before going to Syria in 2014, Mayfa reportedly advised two French girls to wage terrorist acts in France in case they fail to make it to Syria. Mayfa went to Syria in 2014, where she promoted life in IS-held parts of Syria via a series of online videos featuring her carrying Kalashnikovs. Through this video series, Mayfa enticed other women to travel to Syria to marry jihadists. She coordinated with men inside Turkey to facilitate the passage of the French girls to Syria. She was unaware that French intelligence knew of her activities. She was arrested when she landed in Paris, arriving from Turkey. Upon her arrest, Mayfa admitted to the police that she witnessed a beheading in Syria, but she used the same defense as König. She implied that she decided to repent, came back to France and gave up the

name “Um al-Zahraa.” She was reportedly sentenced to eight years in prison in France ([France24](#), April 7; [al-Arabiya](#), September 29, 2015; [Youm7](#), September 28, 2015).

Charged with violent rhetoric and lacking the environment to nourish it, European female jihadists on *hijrah* (immigration) to Syria utilize this rhetoric and make it into a way of life. Active female jihadism, however, was not attracting the attention of European intelligence agencies from 2013 to 2015, as the main focus had always been on male jihadists. This is mainly due to female jihadists being judged as sexual objects and potential brides who are complimentary to the jihadist movement but not a mandatory part of it. This lack of attention gave space for female jihadism to grow within the jihadist movement and become more visible.

Zahra Douman: From Melbourne Partier to IS Propagandist

The danger of female jihadists lies in the connections and networks they establish between each other while fighting for their cause, especially among those from Europe. For some European female insurgents, the cause was a tool and pretext for empowerment. A prominent example is the case of a 21-year-old Australian student of Turkish *descent*, Zahra Douman, who went to Syria to join IS in 2014. Douman was enticed to join the terrorist group by her friend, 23-year-old Mahmood Abdul Latif (a.k.a. “ISIS playboy” by the local Australian media), to whom she married for 40 days before he was killed fighting with IS. The ethnic-Lebanese Abdul Latif from Melbourne led a luxurious life going out to Australian night clubs before he

joined the terrorist group ([Janoubia](#), January 3, 2015).

Douman was reportedly his friend in Melbourne, and they would go out to nightclubs together. Douman is an example of a female jihadist who did not seem to believe in the ideology so much as she was attracted to the supposed extravagant lifestyle of jihadism. Abdul Latif used to exhibit images of children posing with Kalashnikovs on social media, advertising this life in Syria. Abdul Latif gave Douman the idea that life with IS is luxurious. Douman—who at one point tweeted that her dowry was a gun—stated that she burned her Australian passport and she has no intention of returning home. After his death, Douman described Abdul Latif as a “martyr.” On her Twitter account, she challenged whether anyone could capture her and posted Abdul Latif’s photo posing with a Kalashnikov. She added a caption in broken Arabic stating: “graves....be happy.....doors of Paradise, open.....the martyr Mahomood has arrived” ([Watan](#), January 27, 2015).

Douman took on a propagandist role for the group by posting photos of a life of luxury online. Douman described it as “the five-star jihad in Syria.” Douman tweeted photos of five IS women fully covered in black, posing with guns and raising an IS flag near a luxury car ([Sama News](#), March 21, 2015).

She challenged her home country and the United States, saying alongside the other female jihadists: “Australia and the United States, we are five women who were born on your soil and now we are thirsty to drink the blood of your people.” When Douman was criticized online for showing

off a life of luxury while Syria is torn by war, she defended herself, stating that she was posing near the car in order to sell it. Douman was influential within the group, as she enticed many foreign fighters, especially Australian women, to join IS. The most well-known of her recruits is Yasmine Melanouf. Douman's current condition and activities are difficult to track ([Erem News](#), May 27, 2015).

Conclusion

Female militants from the former Caliphate are renouncing their reliance on male-dominated extreme rhetoric and quickly shifting from being sexual objects to singular active units, establishing a new frontier of extreme jihadism.

These three militants endeavored to return to their home countries, survived captivity and imprisonment, and stayed willingly invisible. This common thread highlights a new identity of female militants born out of the falling Caliphate. It is solitary, independent, feminist, and will be a growing form of dangerous militancy for years to come.

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The Master of Pragmatic Jihadist Rebranding: A Profile of HTS' Emir Abu Muhammad al-Julani

Ludovico Carlino

The Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad has continued through 2018 to reverse the direction of the Syrian civil war in its favor. Al-Assad's forces are now in control of much of Syrian territory, except for the country's northern provinces, controlled by Turkish-backed opposition groups, and the Idlib governorate, the last bastion of one of the major players of the Syrian conflict—the jihadist Haya't Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Once considered the biggest and strongest of the armed groups to confront the Syrian military, HTS's longevity is the likely result of the pragmatic choices undertaken by its leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani, who has been leading the group through its different iterations since its establishment in 2012. What follows is a profile of al-Julani that is intrinsically connected to the last 15 years of jihadist struggle across the Levant.

Al-Julani Early Years in Syria

Information in open sources regarding the life of al-Julani before his ascendancy to Emir of the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN), remains scarce and is often conflicting. There are at least two main accounts of Julani's life before he embraced the jihadist cause. These diverge in a number of details but share several others about al-Julani's actions after 2003, the year the U.S. military intervened in Iraq.

According to the first of these sources, al-Julani—whose real name is Ahmed Hussein al-Shar’a—was born in 1984 in the village of al-Rafid, in the Syrian governorate of Quneitra in the Golan Heights. It is from there his *nisbah*, “al-Julani” (a common suffix in Arabic language to form adjectives, often indicating geographical origin) would originate ([Almjhar](#), March 18). Al-Julani’s father was a worker in the Syrian oil industry before moving to work in Saudi Arabia. His mother was a geography teacher. After his time in Saudi Arabia, al-Julani’s father returned to Syria but moved to Damascus, where al-Julani grew up and studied media at the local university. According to this source, al-Julani interrupted his studies at the onset of the Iraqi war in 2003, when he left Syria to join the jihadist insurgency in the neighboring country ([Almjhar](#), March 18).

A second, more reliable source—given the fact that this account has been shared by other Arab media outlets—maintains that al-Julani’s real name is Osama al-Absi al-Wahidi ([Orient News](#), June 11, 2015). He was born in 1981 in the village of al-Shuhail, in the Syrian province of Deir al-Zour, despite his family originating from Idlib, in northern Syria. According to this account, his family moved to Deir al-Zour before al-Julani’s birth, as his father was a driver in the military housing service there ([al-Mesryoon](#), March 18). This account does not mention the family’s experience in Saudi Arabia. It confirms, however, that he studied at Damascus University (although the source suggests he studied medicine for two years). During his university studies, he started to attend the Friday sermons of a so-called, “Sheikh of Salafists,” suggesting

that it was during these years that al-Julani began to embrace jihadism ([al-Mesryoon](#), March 18). According to Egyptian media, the Syrian regime at that time was turning a blind eye to the number of people crossing the border to join the insurgency in Iraq. The “Sheikh of Salafists” ran a recruitment and training center, which al-Julani attended ([al-Mesryoon](#), March 18). Syrian media identified the Sheikh as Abu Qaqaa, Imam of the Bin al-Hadrami mosque in Falah, Aleppo ([Orient News](#), June 11, 2015). This account also coincides with the previous one in saying that al-Julani left Syria for Iraq in 2003 to join the jihadist struggle there, adding that he went with his unnamed brother ([7al](#), June 11, 2015).

Fighting Jihad in Iraq

These and other sources all agree on the fact that once in Iraq, al-Julani joined al-Qaeda in Iraq—at that time led by the infamous Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The precise role played by al-Julani during his experience in Iraq is unclear, but according to the Syrian website al-Hal he quickly climbed the group’s ranks up to al-Zarqawi’s inner circle ([7al](#), June 11, 2015). In late 2004, al-Julani was arrested for the first time by U.S. forces while planting an improvised explosive device (IED) in Fallujah ([al-Mesryoon](#), March 18). He was imprisoned under the name “Abu Ashraf al-Iraqi”, and reportedly he was mistaken for an Iraqi citizen after he was interrogated and showed fluency in the Iraqi dialect of Arabic, and was released after a brief period in detention ([Almjhar](#), March 18). After al-Zarqawi was killed in a U.S. strike in 2006 in the Iraqi province of Diyala, al-Julani moved to Lebanon, where he was in charge of militant training for Jund al-Sham, an al-Qaeda linked

group operating in the ain al-Halawah camp in southern Lebanon ([al-Jazeera](#), June 8, 2006; [Aliwaa](#), October 4, 2017). It is unclear how long al-Julani stayed in the Levantine country, but he reportedly eventually returned to Iraq, where he was arrested again by U.S. forces and imprisoned in Camp Bucca until his release in 2008 ([al-Masdar](#), May 9, 2015). According to Egyptian media, he was released from Camp Bucca after his fellow militants managed to bribe an Iraqi official working at the prison ([al-Mesryoon](#), March 18). Once out of prison, al-Julani re-joined the ranks of al-Qaeda (which had at this time changed its name to Islamic State in Iraq—ISI), where he became head of operations in the northern city of Mosul ([Aliwaa](#), October 4, 2017).

The Return to Syria and the Establishment of Jabhat al-Nusra

The story behind the formal establishment of JaN has been widely documented over the last few years, as the opposing diatribes between JaN, Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and al-Qaeda's Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri, coupled with the consequent schism within jihadism, became a turning point in the history of modern jihadism. According to the most reliable accounts, JaN was established in Syria by five to seven fighters, chief among them al-Julani, who had traveled from Iraq few months after the start of the popular protests against the Syrian regime in late 2011. [1] The idea of expanding operations to Syria was proposed by al-Julani himself and discussed with the ISI leadership, which allocated the necessary financial and logistical resources. The formal establishment of JaN was then announced on January 24, 2012,

with a statement penned by its emir, al-Julani ([al-Jazeera](#), August 5, 2012).

After its establishment, JaN tried to maintain a certain autonomy from both al-Qaeda and ISI, reportedly following al-Julani's advice. Al-Julani stressed the difference between the insurgency in Iraq against the U.S. presence and the Syrian popular revolt, and consequently, the necessity to adopt a much more gradualist approach in Syria. [2] By 2012, as the popular revolt began to take the shape of a large-scale insurgency, JaN started to emerge as one of the strongest forces battling the Syrian Army, re-activating the old jihadist recruitment networks in the country and taking gradual control of energy assets in eastern Syria, which made the group financially self-sufficient ([Annahar](#), February 23, 2013; [al-Rai](#), May 20, 2013). By December 2012, the U.S. Department of State declared JaN to be an officially designated terrorist organization. The announcement emphasized that the group was simply a new alias for al-Qaeda in Iraq, seeking "to hijack the struggles of the Syrian people for its own malign purposes." [3]

This rapid ascendancy made the ISI's leadership suspicious about al-Julani's actions, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi deciding to dispatch a close associate—Abu Ali al-Anbari—to Syria to investigate whether al-Julani was still loyal to him, according to information contained in the Issue 41 of the Islamic State weekly magazine *al-Naba*. [4] Al-Anbari concluded that al-Julani was a "cunning person and double-faced," pushing al-Baghdadi to take action and bring JaN back under his control. On April 8, 2013, al-Baghdadi announced the merger between his group and JaN into a single entity, the Islamic State in Iraq

and Syria (ISIS). The declaration was rejected the following day by al-Julani who, in turn, affirmed JaN's allegiance to al-Qaeda and its emir al-Zawahiri ([al-Jazeera](#), April 9, 2013; [MiddleEastOnline](#), June 10, 2013). The following months were characterized by several attempts to mediate the dispute between the three jihadist groups, culminating in ISIS' expulsion from al-Qaeda's network in February 2014 and the breakout of fighting between JaN and ISIS for control of Syrian territory ([Almodon](#), August 26, 2016). This was one of the first instances of intra-jihadist infighting and the starting point of the (ongoing) battle between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda for the leadership of the global jihadist movement.

Leading JaN into HTS

While al-Julani's name is intrinsically linked to the story of the falling out between Zawahiri and al-Baghdadi, his two public appearances following years of concealment revealed his pragmatic approach and his ability to exploit modern media to pursue his personal agenda. In May 2015, he was interviewed on al-Jazeera with his face covered by a scarf ([al-Jazeera](#), May 28, 2015). He stated that JaN did not have any plans to attack the West and that the group's priority was to fight the Syrian regime and Islamic State. He added that at the end of the war, all factions in the country would be consulted before anyone considered establishing an Islamic state in Syria.

Al-Julani's attempt to portray the jihadist struggle in Syria as a fundamentally Syrian-led and Syrian-focused effort was reiterated in his second public appearance—in May 2016—once again on al-Jazeera ([YouTube](#), July 28, 2016). This

time, al-Julani showed his face for the very first time during a well-staged press conference reminiscent of Osama bin Laden's press conference in 1998. Al-Julani announced the complete cancellation of all operations under the name of JaN, and the formation of a new group operating under the name of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS), stating that this new organization had no affiliation to any external entity ([al-Khaleej](#), July 28, 2016).

At that time, many interpreted this split as an attempt by JaN to disassociate its name from al-Qaeda in order to better embed itself in the Syrian Islamist opposition while covertly retaining the relationship. However, new information emerged indicating that al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri had, in reality, not approved the move and demanded al-Julani reverse the announcement ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), November 30, 2017). Not only has al-Julani not followed through with al-Zawahiri's order, but in January 2017 he led the merger of JFS with other jihadist groups involved in the Syrian war (Ansar al-Din, Jaysh al-Sunna, Liwa al-Haqq and Nour al-Din al-Zenki) into a new umbrella group known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), of which he was appointed overall military commander ([al-Hayat](#), October 2, 2017). Although HTS received the same accusation of working as al-Qaeda's Syrian branch on a covert level, the group officially denied being part of al-Qaeda. In February 2017, HTS released a statement presenting itself as an "independent entity and not an extension of previous organizations or factions" ([al-Jazeera](#), February 9, 2017).

Conclusion

In November 2017, Ayman al-Zawahiri released a statement stressing that he “did not release Jabhat al-Nusra or anyone else from their oaths of allegiance [to him].” Obviously, the issue between al-Julani and his “mother organization” has not yet been solved, and it remains a source of intra-jihadist disagreement, this time within al-Qaeda’s camp ([The National](#), November 29, 2017). It is unlikely that this disagreement has anything to do with al-Julani revisiting or diluting (as some pro-al-Qaeda jihadist circles claim) his jihadist stance after more than 15 years of militancy. It is more likely that al-Julani has simply opted for a much more pragmatic and opportunistic approach aimed at retaining his relevance in the Syrian jihadist theater. In the long run, he is attempting to distance himself and his group from the al-Qaeda brand, and initiating a process of systemic re-branding in order to present his struggle as part of the Syrian rebellion.

This scheme has gained a renewed urgency since 2017, as jihadist fortunes in Syria (both for the Islamic State and the al-Qaeda-leaning entities) have started to decline and HTS has been squeezed in the Idlib pocket where it now faces the threat of being annihilated by a new Syrian army offensive. The next few months will be key to whether al-Julani will be able to resort to his pragmatism and navigate HTS through this latest existential challenge.

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Notes

[1] On the story behind JaN establishment, see the detailed: [How al-Qaeda lost control of its Syrian affiliate: the inside story](#), CTC Sentinel, February 2018

[2] Shaykh Abū ‘Abd Allah al-Shāmī: “[In The Shade of the Big Tree of Jihād](#)”-

[3] <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/266590.htm>

[4] <https://jihadology.net/2016/08/02/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-41/>

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