Prominent Iraqi Shia Militia Leader Arrested—The Rise and Fall of Aws al-Khafaji

Rafid Jaboori

Prominent Iraqi Shia militia leader Aws al-Khafaji was arrested by men from the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), the umbrella organization of the predominantly Shia armed groups. He was captured during a raid on his militia’s main office in Baghdad in early February. Several sources suggested that al-Khafaji was detained because of his recent criticism of Iran (al-Jazeera February 8).

Al-Khafaji is the leader of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade (AFAB), a militia that he formed in Syria in 2012 to fight alongside the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad under the pretext of protecting Shia shrines in that country. When Islamic State (IS) overran large parts of Iraq in June 2014, al-Khafaji extended his militias’ activities to his home country. At the height of its power, al-Khafaji’s AFAB was estimated to include 5,000 fighters. In the weeks that preceded his arrest, al-Khafaji became vocal in his criticism of Iranian dominance of Iraqi politics. He also accused his fellow Shia militia leaders of corruption. [1]

Aws al-Khafaji was born in 1973 in the city of al-Shatra in Thi Qar province of southern Iraq. He grew up in the city that, in the mid-20th century, was known to be one of the strongholds of the Iraqi Communist Party. The area, however, became more religious and conservative in the following decades. After graduating from the University of Basra with a degree in physical education in 1995, he chose to become a Shia cleric. He enrolled in Shia seminars (Hawza) in the holy city of Najaf, and quickly became a confidant of the late Shia cleric Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, the father of Moqtada al-Sadr and one of the most prominent senior clerics of his time. In the mid-1990s, al-Sadr the elder began building a network of regional representatives in the Iraqi provinces,
and al-Khafaji’s Thi Qar was one of the areas where al-Sadr’s following was increasing. The network consisted mainly of young and enthusiastic clerics who became loyal disciples of Sadiq al-Sadr. Al-Khafaji was assigned by his leader to coordinate the most important activity of the network—the weekly Friday prayers which were being held across Shia areas in southern Iraq and the capital Baghdad. [2]

The Saddam Hussein government became more anxious about the growing influence of al-Sadr and his movement after years of tolerance. Al-Sadr was assassinated in February 1999 near Najaf. The Iraqi government then accused Iran and internal rivalries within the Shia clergy of being behind the assassination, but it was widely believed that the Iraqi Intelligence Service was behind the killing. Al-Kafaji had already become a suspect because of his perceived anti-government activities under al-Sadr’s leadership. He was arrested in early 1999, weeks before the killing of his mentor. He remained in jail for three years (al-Hayat, February 23, 2000). After the U.S.-led invasion of 2003, al-Khafaji assumed a senior role within the ranks of the followers of the Sadr family, led by its new patriarch, Moqtada.

Al-Khafaji became a prominent founding member of al-Sadr’s militia, the Mahdi Army. He was well known for his public incitement of hatred and call for attacks against the U.S.-led coalition forces. In 2007, he had to flee the country to avoid arrest. Though Iran became a preferred destination for al-Sadr and his followers, al-Khafaji chose to go to Syria. That might have been an early sign of al-Khafaji’s tendency to have a degree of insolence towards Iranian influence. While he was in Syria, then-Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki launched a crackdown against the Mahdi Army. Al-Sadr and al-Maliki have been political enemies ever since.

In 2010, Moqtada al-Sadr suspected that al-Khafaji was cooperating with al-Maliki, causing him to disavow al-Khafaji (Buratha News, November 11, 2010). Al-Khafaji returned to Iraq and worked under al-Maliki’s leadership. When he needed political cover and financial support for his militia, al-Maliki’s Dawa party provided it. But with al-Maliki out of office and the relative decline of the Dawa party, al-Khafaji grew weaker. His response was apparently to attempt to show more independence and promote moderate ideas.

**Conclusion**

Despite his history as a militia leader and a member of the Sadrist movement, al-Khafaji could not build his own base of support. He never had the status of his former leader, Moqtada al-Sadr, who inherited the Sadrist movement from his father. Unlike other Sadrist militia leaders like Qais al-Khazali or Akram al-Kaabi, al-Khafaji did not fully embrace Iran as a patron.

When he was detained there was no reaction from his militia. This was an example of the control the PMU leadership has over the militias it oversees, and which have mushroomed in size since 2014. The orders to arrest al-Khafaji was believed to have come from Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy leader of the PMU and a longtime ally to Iran. The incident revealed that
the PMU has its own security apparatus that is ready to move against the slightest dissent.

Notes

[1] See, for example, this clip from an interview published on YouTube on January 8: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dT1HUxXA5A0


Mauritania’s Security Risks and the Impact of the Arrest of Cheick Ibrahim Ould Hamoud

Dario Cristiani

Introduction

While Algeria is going through a period of instability, another country in the Maghreb-Sahel region is also experiencing a power transition—Mauritania (see Hot Issue, March 16). This transitional process should, despite the risks posed by jihadist groups, be smoother than Algeria’s.

On January 15, the Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz asked the members of his party, the Union for the Republic (Union pour la République—UPR), to stop seeking a constitutional change which would allow him to run for a third term as president (Jeune Afrique, January 15). The announcement opened the doors to Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, the Minister of Defense, to declare his candidacy for presidency. He subsequently resigned from his position in the government on March 15. This sequence of events suggest that there will be a guided transition from Abelaziz’s rule to that of a close ally and fellow UPR member (Jeune Afrique, March 15). Appointed to the cabinet in November 2018, Ghazouani was the previous chief of the army and is a long-standing ally of Abdelaziz.

All the major political forces of Mauritania are now rallying behind Ghazouani’s campaign for the presidency. The UPR and the other forces of
the government announced their support for him, and Ghazouani met all of them immediately after he resigned (Tawary Press Agency, March 17). Ghazouani said he was supportive of a third mandate for Abdelaziz, a rhetorical strategy aimed at dissipating doubts over potential disagreements with the president and to signal that continuity will characterize the upcoming political transition (Le360, March 17).

As change approaches, it is essential to highlight the persistence of several security risks for Mauritania. While Mauritania has been relatively immune to regional terrorism in the past few years, the recent arrest in Northern Mali of a Mauritanian jihadist militant, Cheick Ibrahim Ould Hamoud (a.k.a. Abu al-Dardaa al-Chinguetti), is a reminder of the type of risks Mauritania faces.

**The Personal Profile of Cheick Ibrahim Ould Hamoud**

On February 8, the French forces of Operation Barkhane announced the arrest of Ould Hamoud in Timbuktu, in Northern Mali (ANI [Nouakchott], February 8, 2019). Born in 1982 in Magta-Lahjar, a town located in the Brakna Region in southern Mauritania, Ould Hamoud has been on the authorities’ radar for the past ten years, at least. In May 2010, the Nouakchott Criminal Court sentenced Hamoud to eight years of imprisonment on charges of belonging to a terrorist organization; taking part in a group created to commit terrorist acts; and providing support to a perpetrator of a terrorist act to prevent his arrest (C.Ri.DE.M, May 17, 2010). A few months later, Hamoud was released because of the mass amnesty that President Abdelaziz signed in honor of the holy month of Ramadan in September 2010 (Sahara Media Agency, September 8, 2010).

Remarkably, Hamoud immediately rejoined the ranks of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). In February 2011, he was again captured by Mauritanian forces, this time at the border with Senegal, according to officials from the Trarza province of Mauritania. Hamoud was crossing the border with another jihadist fighter, Beiba Ould Navê, who was wearing an explosive belt that he detonated as soon as security personnel approached. Hamoud was wounded during the ensuing exchange of fire and arrested, but in July 2011 he escaped custody (C.Ri.DE.M, February 6, 2011).

Hamoud allegedly joined al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) sometime between 2007 and 2008. His first alleged operation with the group involved the kidnapping of two Austrian tourists, who were abducted in southern Tunisia in 2008 (C.Ri.DE.M, May 18, 2010). However, he never reached top leadership positions in ideology or logistics within the organization. He was a member of the al-Furghan brigade, before entering the ranks of the Mokhtar Belmokhtar-led group al-Mourabitun. Then, after the latter rejoined AQIM by the end of 2015, Hamoud re-entered the ranks of the broader organization, and became part of the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin’—JNIM) whose primary operational focus is the Sahel (Jeune Afrique, March 02, 2017).
However, while he may not be a crucial leader within the organization, his arrest was nevertheless important as he is one of the many Mauritanians who joined AQIM and its affiliates. The threat posed by these fighters is often overlooked, since Mauritania did well in countering these threats in the past few years. However, as Mauritania enters a delicate phase of its history, the presence of these fighters in the Sahel and the Sahara, who have received training and jihadist socialization over the past years, pose a number of challenges.

The Mauritanian Transition and Security Risks

In the geostrategic context of the Maghreb-Saheli region, Mauritania has never been a crucial player, given its small population and economy. However, over the past years the country's importance has increased exponentially as Mauritania has become a recipient of foreign investment, particularly in the oil sector (Africa News, December 25, 2016). Mauritania was the first country hit by the predecessor of AQIM, the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat—GSPC), once the group began operating outside of Algeria. GSPC members assaulted the El Mreiti military base in Lemghiety on June 4, 2005, killing 15 Mauritanian soldiers (RFI, June 6, 2005).

In the following years, the number of direct attacks in Mauritania shrank, but the country remained a significant hotspot for AQIM logistics planning and kidnapping operations (TM, January 28, 2010). That said, there are growing risks. In 2018, AQIM openly mentioned Mauritania as a target in its call for economic jihad in the region (La Nouvelle République, May 10, 2018). Besides, Ghazouani was the architect of a significant strengthening of relations between Mauritania and Western actors, namely France and NATO (The New Arab Weekly, November 4, 2018; NATO, May 29, 2018). It is likely that Mauritania, under his presidency, will continue to strengthen these ties. This dynamic might push AQIM to increase its rhetoric and operational pressure on Mauritania.

Conclusion

Power transitions always pose risks, as new political balances stabilize. This will be the case in Mauritania. The profile of Ould Hamoud suggests that he is not a crucial ideological leader within AQIM, unlike other Mauritanian operatives, such as Mohamed Lemine Ould El-Hassen (a.k.a. Abdallah al-Chinguetti), the Mauritanian leader of AQIM’s al-Fourghan brigade (who was killed in 2013) or Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou (a.k.a. Abou Ghom-Ghoum), the leader of Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), who pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) in 2015.

However, Hamoud has shown a significant degree of resilience, as he has been arrested previously yet has managed, one way or another, to return to the battlefield. Like him, several Mauritanian fighters have joined the ranks of AQIM in the past few years. Although their presence does not represent an existential threat to Mauritania, it nevertheless poses a potential risk, which must be taken more and more
Shamima Begum and The New Era of Stateless Jihadism

Halla Diyab

Shamima Begum has been the talking point of the international media and has dominated the headlines after her British citizenship was stripped, the most public example of an Islamic-State (IS)-bride-turned-stateless-jihadist. With IS losing its last enclave in Baghouz, Syria, the group’s members, like Begum, are left with no choice but to either remain under attack, or surrender to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Begum was one of those who fled the battlefield and has failed to secure a way back to her home country. The new phenomenon of the stateless jihadist suggests that IS’ cycle of violence has only paused, and will continue in the near future.

The Repetitive Cycle of Extremism

Jihadists’ ideology is based on violence, intrusion and perpetration. Similar to cycles of abuse, the reversal of the insurgency’s territorial expansion following the numerous atrocities committed by the jihadists has functioned as a turning point and tossed many into a state of remorse. Western jihadists may try to explain their actions by blaming other factors—for example, saying they were lied to by the propaganda videos or were brainwashed—but remorse is ultimately a tactic of defense. They will adopt a manipulative strategy to win sympathy and to make it appear as though the perpetrator has changed. However, this phase is often momentary, as some former jihadists return to the fight once they gain the ability to do so.
A prominent example is the case of Shamima Begum (also known as Umm Jarah), a British woman who, at the age of 15, left the United Kingdom to join the Islamic State with two other two school girls (Aawsat, February 25). In 2015, she stole her eldest sister’s passport and traveled to Syria via Turkey in order to marry Ago Riedijk, 27, who was a Dutch convert to Islam. Their marriage was arranged 10 days after she arrived in the group’s then-stronghold, Raqqa. She had three children, two of whom died before she was moved to al Hawla refugee camp in Syria. At the camp, her new born baby also died (Emaratalyoum, March 6). After fleeing Baghouz with her husband, Begum was moved to al-Hawal camp in eastern Syria. From here, she now pleads to return to the United Kingdom.

Begum describes herself as a housewife within IS. However, there is not a simple definition of such a role within the group (Aawsat, February 26). Simplifying the role of IS women—as Begum attempts to do in describing herself as a “peaceful housewife”—borrows from IS’ wide-ranging propaganda aimed at women. This influence campaign attempts to portray these women’s commitment to the movement as being born out of a selfless love, by emphasizing the huge lengths that these girls have gone to for IS and their husbands. It is part of a strategy which seeks to portray the female jihadists as being ultimately altruistic, with the goal of gaining sympathy and public support in the West that could secure their survival (Kapitalis, July 25, 2018; Annahar, February 6, 2018).

Alternating between victimization and denial, Begum’s tone moves from remorse to arrogance. She alters her rhetoric according to the situation, choosing when she wants to be seen as a mother whose baby is “[her] biggest priority—as [she] left because of him” in order to invoke sympathy (Almasryalyoum, February 18). This is clear during her media appearances, in which she engages emotionally with the audience, describing herself as a mother of two children who died due to a lack of medical care. However, she becomes dismissive when she compares the Manchester terrorist attack in 2017 to the bombing of IS in Baghouz.

Begum’s ploy for sympathy is similar to the case of Hoda Muthana, the IS bride from Alabama. Muthana also joined the group, but now says she regrets the decision. Like the United Kingdom, the United States has not allowed her to return home (Erem News, February 21). Also like Begum, Muthana has stated that her child’s welfare is one of the main reasons she wishes to return to the United States. She holds her child in all of her media appearances (Rudaw, February 22).

**Stateless Jihadists Turned Public Sensations**

With the citizenship of many Western IS jihadists being revoked, and their return home being barred by their governments, “stateless jihadists” are on the rise. Uncertainty over their legal status has turned IS members like Begum and Muthana into a new form of stateless female militant. They aim to engage with the public by speaking to the media, portraying themselves as victims who have been unjustly treated by authorities, with the ultimate goal of gradually
winning the public’s approval and returning to the West.

The existence of the stateless jihadists, under the fragile control of the SDF, should raise alarms. With Baghouz having fallen to the SDF, and IS territorially defeated, what will happen to these stateless jihadists? Women in IS are occupying new roles, as shown by the female suicide bomber who recently detonated her explosives belt near the SDF council (Syria.TV, January 29). There is the possibility that many radicalized former IS members will escape to neighboring countries through the region’s porous borders. In new areas, they can mobilize under fake identities and names and gradually organize sleeper cells in order to plan future attacks and harbor their narrative. This will constitute a national and international threat.

**Conclusion**

IS benefits in many ways from the rising phenomenon of stateless jihadists. Their visibility allows IS to begin changing from a territorial entity into an ideological movement, with sympathetic Western women acting as its representatives. It is in equal measure both effective and dangerous, as it could appeal to young, impressionable Muslims in the West who may already be feeling isolated and rejected from their communities. With these stateless jihadists having no one to answer to, except to their extreme ideology, it would be easier for them to organize into small groups, and gradually begin a new form of stateless jihadism.

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**Post-Mortem Analysis: The Assassination of Taliban Godfather Sami ul Haq**

Farhan Zahid

Among jihadist circles in Pakistan, few ideologues managed to attract such widespread respect and charisma as Maulana Sami ul Haq. His credentials include Islamist jihadist writings, fatwas against Western forces, teaching and running his own grand madrasah, active participation in politics, running his own Islamist political party, and of course, vehement support for al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. In this respect, no Islamist ideologue could have such a profound and prolific profile, with the exception of Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai (another well respected ideologue). For Pakistani jihadists, he was a larger than life figure. On November 2, 2018, he was killed by his personal assistant for mysterious reasons that still have not been disclosed by the authorities. Extremist circles have not accepted his death as a result of a personal feud, and instead consider it a grand conspiracy against the Islamist movement in Pakistan.

**Background**

Since Deobandism’s founding in 1867, the ultra-orthodox movement has attracted a number of clerics and followers from the North-West Frontier Province, which in 2008 was renamed the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province in modern Pakistan. The region is the hinterland of the Pashtun ethnic community and known for its strict adherence to conservative and orthodox
versions of Islam blended with the traditional, pre-Islamic, Pashtunwali code.

Sami’s father Molvi Abdul Haq (1912-1988) was one of those Pashtun clerics who went to study at the Dar ul Uloom Deoband madrasah (in the Saharanpur district of the United Provinces, today known as the state of Uttar Pradesh) in British India, and later opened his own madrasah called the Dar ul Uloom Haqqania in 1947 in the Akora Khattak area, in the suburbs of the Nowshera district, in KPK. The Dar ul Uloom Haqqania was to become the spiritual headquarters of many violent Islamist movements in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and became known as the “University of Jihad” (Radio Free Liberty, March 18, 2018). Abdul Haq also served as a faculty member of Dar ul Uloom Deoband before Pakistan's independence in 1947 (Official Website of Haqqania, Accessed on March 11). He not only founded the madrasah, but also became its first principal. After his death in 1988, the school passed to his son, Sami ul Haq, who also remained the principal until his death in 2018.

Sami ul Haq was born in 1937 in Akora Khattak, the ancestral village of his father. He was raised by his father on strict Deobandi lines and studied at his madrasah at Akora Khattak, where he completed his Dar-e-Nizami course (the seven-year-long course to become an Alim, an Islamic legal scholar) (Khyber.org, Accessed on March 11). Like his father, who remained a high-ranking leader of the Islamist political party Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam (a successor party to Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Hind in India) in Pakistan, Haq founded his own faction of JUI after differences developed between him and Fazal ur Rehman, the leader of JUI and the son of Mufti Mehmood, a contemporary of Haq's father.

Influence and Political Career

Haq played an active role in Islamist politics of Pakistan, though unlike the JUI (Rehman) faction, his political party remained a fringe group and did not manage to gather as many seats as Rehman's party in general elections. Despite this shortcoming, his role could not be ignored because of the chain of religious seminaries he established across Pakistan, which he did while remaining a part of several coalitions of successive governments during the 1990s and 2000s. Interestingly, Rehman himself studied at the Akkora Khattak madrasah and considered Haq his teacher (Express Tribune, November 2, 2018).

Haq joined hands with the military regime of Islamist military dictator General Zia ul Haq in the early 1980s, and seconded Zia’s use of violent, Islamist, non-state actors in Afghanistan against the backdrop of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In this respect, he agitated JUI-F leader Fazal ur Rehman, who joined the anti-Zia opposition alliance, the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD), in 1981. Haq was also elected to the Majlis-e-Shura, a hand-picked National Assembly during Zia’s martial law regime. In his post-military-rule political career, he was twice elected to the Senate, the upper house of Pakistani legislature. [1]

Haq was an upfront Islamist and never hesitated to support ideologically aligned terrorist groups operating in the region. When General Pervez Musharraf’s military regime started to crackdown on Islamist militant groups following
the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Haq joined the anti-Musharraf Islamist parties’ alliance, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA). The Islamist political parties' alliance managed to form governments in KPK and Baluchistan provinces in the 2002 general elections (Global Security, Accessed on March 11). The MMA did not last very long and in the 2008 elections, Haq parted ways with other Islamist parties and the alliance collapsed. Meanwhile he joined another alliance, Dafa-e-Pakistan Council (DFC), and was selected as its president. The DFC was an alliance of like-minded Islamist political parties and terrorist groups, and worked as a coalition to support Islamist causes. It considered itself as a bulwark against American interests in the country. The DFC organized protests against Pakistan’s decision to allow NATO routes to Afghanistan, and promoted anti-Western and Indian policies (Express Tribune, February 3, 2012). Many of the members of the alliance were leaders of proscribed Islamist terrorist groups such as Hafiz Saeed of Lashkar-e-Taiba, Fazal ur Rehman Khalil of Harkat ul Mujahideen, and others.

Haq's political career was also marred by interactions with violent Islamist groups, especially the Afghan Taliban, as many of the group’s leaders had graduated from his madrasah. During the Afghan War (1979-1989), he supported the mujahideen groups against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. His madrasah graduates played pivotal roles as many of them became part of the Afghan jihad against the Soviet and Afghan government forces until the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989. He continued to remain a respected figure among Deobandi jihadist organizations in Pakistan, such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Harkatul Mujahedeen, Harkatul Jihad-e-Islami and Jaish-e-Mohammad. Haq was influential in Pakistani politics because of his reputation in jihadist circles, and he was asked several times to negotiate with the TTP on behalf of the government. The ruling provincial government of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) donated approximately $2 million (277 million Pakistani rupees) to his madrasah as a political move to acquire his support for the 2018 general elections (Dawn, February 23, 2018). The donation of such a large sum remained an issue of debate in Pakistani politics for quite some time.

Apart from his political influence, Haq was the center of some controversies, including his relations with a local brothel in the early 1990s, and of course his mysterious death at the hands of his own servant in November 2018.

In Jihad

As mentioned earlier, top militant mujahideen commanders, including Younis Khalis of Hizb-e-Islami and Mohammad Nabi Sher Mohammadi, were graduates of his madrasah and trained under his direct tutelage. He continued to support jihadist causes in the region after the end of the Afghan War. Various renowned authors such as Ahmed Rashid described Haq as the father of the Taliban because of the crucial role his madrasah students played during the Afghan conflict and in the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, i.e. the Afghan Taliban regime, in 1996 after the fall of Kabul. At critical times when the Taliban lost battles against the
Northern Alliance forces, he closed down his madrasahs and sent all of his students to the war front. He also helped mobilize war efforts by collecting donations for the Taliban domestically and from Islamist donors in the Middle East. When the Afghan Taliban took over the country and established their government in most parts of Afghanistan, at least eight of their cabinet members were Haq's students, as were scores of Taliban governors, Sharia court judges, military commanders, and local leaders. As far as the Pakistani jihadist landscape is concerned, Sami refused to condemn the Pakistani Taliban and their acts of terrorism in Pakistan. His influence was such that when his madrassah was connected to the assassination of Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, no action was taken against him by the government of the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party. Some law enforcement officers believed that the plot to assassinate her was hatched at the madrassah by some students who later moved on to join TTP (Dawn, February 26, 2015). The current TTP Emir, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, admitted in his book that the perpetrators were the same people pointed out by the investigating officers.

### Works

Haq was a prolific Islamist writer and authored more than 20 books. He wrote on a range of issues, from stories about early Islamic warriors to the ideology of the Afghan Taliban. His most popular writings included *Carvan-e-Akhrat*, *Millat-e-Islamia ka Muaqaf on Qadyaniayt* (co-authored with Taqi Usmani), *Khatbat-e-Mushareer* (10 volumes), *Qumai Assembly me Islam ka Marka*, *Saleebi Dahshatgardi*, and *Alim-e-Islam* (in the context of the 9/11 attacks). He also started publishing a monthly journal, *Al-Haq*, and remained its editor-in-chief until his death. *Al-Haq* could be considered one of the first jihadist journals in Pakistan. Haq's last notable book was *Afghan Taliban War of Ideology: Struggle for Peace* which was published in 2015. Haq explained and justified the Afghan Taliban’s efforts to bring peace to the region and the movement’s virtues.

### Conclusion

The mysterious assassination of Haq was a shock to Islamist circles in Pakistan. Initially it was thought that he was killed by the Afghan government’s intelligence agencies, but it later emerged that the killing was the result of a personal disagreement. No conclusive cause of his death was announced by the investigating officers and it remains a mystery to this day despite the case’s high-profile nature. Unlike Fazal ur Rehman, who survived three assassination attempts in suicide bombings by the Pakistani Taliban, Haq was never the target of any such assassination attempt, and continued to be respected by both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban groups operating in the region.

Haq became involved with successive governments in Islamabad in order to work as a peace broker between the Pakistani Taliban and government. Even U.S. ambassadors and the Afghan government requested his assistance in bringing the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table. Had he not died, he might have played a role in both the current and future negotiations with the Afghan Taliban.

### Notes
On January 17, the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen announced that an intelligence operation conducted in Sanaa resulted in the killing of a former Yemen Air Force commander who had defected to the Houthi militia—Ibrahim Ali al-Shami (al-Tagheer, January 19). The operation was carried out as part of the broader military intervention started by the Saudi-led coalition in March 2015, with the aim of reinstating the internationally recognized government of President Abu Rabbu Mansour Hadi (al-Arabya, January 17). President Hadi was forcibly deposed in February 2015, when the Shia-Zaydi Houthi militia took power in the Yemeni capital. Ali al-Shami was a central figure in the Houthi military apparatus, as he was widely considered one of the key commanders behind the Houthi ballistic missile program. What follows is a post-mortem profile of him, which looks at his past in the Yemeni army until his defection to the Houthi movement, and the enigmatic circumstances still surrounding his death.

Long Career in the Yemeni army

Ibrahim Ali al-Shami was born in 1960 in al-Nadhir, a small district in the central Yemeni province of Ibb (Akhbarak.net, January 18). No accessible information exists in open sources on his family’s background or his early studies, with the only details available suggesting that he attended a school in Ibb, where he graduated in
1979 (Almandeb.news, January 20, 2019). In the same year, Ali al-Shami joined the National Defense College in Sanaa, but just one year later he was seconded to the Krasnodar Air Force Academy in the former Soviet Union, where he graduated in 1982 as a second lieutenant fighter pilot (Akhbarak.net, January 18). At that time, Yemen was still divided between the Yemen Arab Republic (commonly known as North Yemen, with Sanaa as its capital) and the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (covering much of today’s southern Yemen, with Aden as Its capital), a Marxist socialist republic supported by the Soviet Union. Relationships with Moscow, however, had been strong with both Sanaa and Aden since the 1960s. The USSR, for instance, assisted the North Yemeni government in building the port of Hodeidah (the main battlefront of the current civil war) and several military airbases across the country. Moreover, several Soviet technical missions were carried out in Yemen through the 1970s and the 1980s, and Yemeni students and military officers used to be sent to study in Czechoslovakia and the USSR. [1]

In 1980, the Yemen Arab Republic also signed an important weapons supply deal with the Soviet Union alongside several other military agreements, culminated in an official visit to Moscow in 1981 by late President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the first by a YAR president since 1964. It was in this context that al-Shami received his military education in the Soviet Union, which he completed in 1987. Upon his return to Yemen, he was served as head of the Aviation Safety Division of the Yemeni Air Forces from 1990 to 1996 (Akhbarak, January 17; Hafryat, January 20). The entirety of al-Shami’s military career was characterized by senior military positions in the aviation division, including his service as head of the Planning Division of the Air Force from 1996 to 2002, and his move to the post of deputy director of Air Force personnel training in 2007 (al-Ain, January 20).

**Defection to the Houthi Militia**

No public accounts of al-Shami’s time before the Houthi armed takeover of Sanaa on February 6, 2015 are available in open sources. Al-Shami, however, was likely among those military officers still loyal to former President Saleh and willing to forge an opportunistic alliance with the Houthi militia to get rid of President Hadi’s government. Saleh, despite having been sidelined in the new political arrangement following the 2011 uprising (stepping down from the presidency in exchange for personal immunity), had remained the real master of Yemeni politics, thanks to his control over the most relevant divisions of the army—including the Republican Guards elite force—and his patronage network. Saleh’s support, and the backing of those sections of the army still loyal to him, were crucial in making it possible for the Houthi movement to gradually take over the country’s state institutions and, ultimately, triggering the current civil war.

In 2015, in fact, Houthi-controlled Yemeni media suggested that al-Shami was appointed as Chief of Staff of the Air Force and Air Defense (Saba.net, January 17, 2019). This information is corroborated by another account, which states that al-Shami became the country’s top Air Force commander after his predecessor, Major General Rashid al-Junud, had escaped from Sanaa.
following the Houthi takeover in February 2015 (BBC Arabic, May 15, 2015). Relations between al-Shami and the Houthi leadership were likely tense and complicated at the beginning, given Houthi suspicions towards members of the Yemeni Army and the attempts by the Zaydi militia to place individuals loyal to them in key state and military positions. In May 2015, al-Shami resigned from his post, accusing the Houthi of “cowardly acts,” of preventing his staff members from joining the Air Force and dismissing several of them (BBC Arabic, May 15, 2015; Yemen Press, May 31, 2015). Local sources also added that the Houthi had tried to force a number of Air Force officials to redeploy from Sanaa to the Hadramawt province and join combat missions there against Saudi-led coalition-supported forces, a move that al-Shami tried to resist (BBC Arabic, May 15, 2015). It is unclear how and when exactly this fracture was recomposed, but Yemeni media indicated that sometime in 2016, al-Shami was again reinstated to his post of Chief of Staff, and also became Acting Commander of the Air Force and Air Defense (Saba.net, January 17).

The “Black Box” of the Houthi Movement

All of the regional media outlets portray al-Shami as the main individual behind the Houthi ballistic missile program, with some newspapers labelling him the “black box” of the Houthis (Almandeb, January 23, 2019). These accounts indicate that his first contribution was to facilitate the looting of missiles from Yemeni Army depots and warehouses, handing them over to the Houthis, and providing information about the secret locations where these weapons were stored across Air Force camps (al-Ain, January 20). Yemeni stockpiles of ballistic missiles date back to the 1990s, especially two variants of the North Korea and Soviet origin Scud missile that were also used during the 1994 civil war fought between the North and the South (The National, June 7, 2015). It was one of these Scud missiles that the Houthis launched towards the Saudi city of Khamis Mushait in June 2015, introducing a tactic that the militia has resorted to with increasing frequency throughout the conflict (The National, June 6, 2015).

Support received by Iran widely documented by the UN later enabled the Houthi movement to increase the range of these missiles to the point of reaching the Saudi capital of Riyadh in June 2018, though there is no information available to suggest whether al-Shami has had any connection with Tehran (al-Jazeera, June 28, 2018).

Al-Shami’s role appeared to be to coordinate the logistics of these attacks, as he was the official issuing directives and orders to fire missiles into Saudi territory, and against coalition positions in Yemen, as well as providing military information and the coordinates for these launches (al-Ain, January 20). This high-profile role likely explains why in November 2017, al-Shami was added to the list of the most-wanted Houthi militants issued by the Saudi government. Al-Shami was 19th on this list and accused of being responsible for planning, implementing, and supporting various terrorist activities in support of the Houthi militia. The Saudi government offered $10 million for information leading to his arrest.
Given the fact that the Houthi militia does not have aircraft, most of the tasks carried out by al-Shami were likely related to the management and development of ballistic missile capabilities, often presented by the Houthi propaganda as “defensive capabilities.” In an interview published in March 2018 by Houthi-controlled media, for instance, al-Shami stressed in several passages the key role played by the Yemeni Air Defense Forces in “resisting and confronting the Saudi-American aggression.” Al-Shami maintained that, despite the lack of Yemeni aircraft engaged in the conflict, and the resulting unequal balance of power, “the Air Defense units managed to improve their capabilities in other fields,” a likely reference to the development of the Houthi ballistic missile capabilities (Yemeni Press, June 28, 2018).

Conclusions

The initial Yemeni media reactions to the killing of al-Shami suggest that the initial divergences that had characterized his relationship with the Houthi movement resurfaced sometime in late 2018. Following the Saudi-coalition announcement, several Houthi-related media and social media accounts stated that al-Shami died in Sanaa as a result of a stroke, accusing the Saudi-led coalition of spreading false information (Aljadeedpress, January 17). Another account even suggested that al-Shami was removed from his post a few months before his death following a decision by Houthi leader Abdulmalik and was in the midst of a power struggle between two rival wings within the militia (Eremnews, January 17). The movement eventually acknowledged al-Shami’s death with an official statement, in which they did not make any reference to the exact circumstances (26Sep.net, January 17). Either way, al-Shami’s demise deprives the Houthi militia of a relevant and skilled military figure, who has enabled the movement to boost and refine its ballistic missile capabilities. His departure, however, is unlikely to have a significant impact on the militia’s intent and capacity to continue mounting ballistic missiles attacks, and will likely result in more military figures directly loyal to the Houthi movement stepping up to high-ranking positions.

Notes