



# MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

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#### **Yehia Moussa—Muslim Brotherhood Member Indicted for Assassination of Egyptian Prosecutor General**

*Muhammad Mansour*

An Egyptian court has indicted Yehia Elsayed Ibrahim Moussa—a.k.a. Yehia Moussa—for being the mastermind behind the murder of Egypt's Prosecutor General Hisham Barakat on June 29, 2015. Moussa is a Muslim Brotherhood member who lives in exile in Turkey, and his indictment is the result of court proceedings that have taken place over the past three years ([Al-Arabiya](#), February 21; [Al-Youm Elsabea](#), February 20).

The indictment came after those accused of the attack testified in court that Moussa—the former spokesperson for the ministry of health during Mohamed Morsi's one-year tenure as president—recruited for and orchestrated Barakat's assassination. Barakat was killed when an IED

placed in a parked vehicle detonated near his passing motorcade.

The court found the nine Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated perpetrators guilty and sentenced them to death. Egypt's authorities executed them on February 20. In a separate, earlier ruling in the same case, Cairo Criminal Court sentenced 28 other people to death for involvement in the assassination plot. The total number of suspects in Barkat's murder case is 67, including 16 people who have fled the country ([Al-Arabiya](#), February 20).

According to his own confession, Mohamady, a high school student, was introduced to Moussa through some of his Muslim Brotherhood contacts. He claimed that Mohamady sent him through underground tunnels on the Egyptian border to Gaza. Mohamady met other Muslim Brotherhood members there, including Abu Yasser, Abo Omar, and Abu Hozafa. In Gaza, he also developed several skills related to guerilla

warfare, including bomb-making expertise ([Al-Youm Al-Sabae](#), February 20).

Mohamady, who was arrested after the attack, confessed that Moussa had tasked him to prepare an explosive charge weighing 60 kilograms to target the prosecutor general. After he received the required materials to manufacture the bomb, Moussa planned the attack to take place on June 28 ([Mada Masr](#), February 20).

Ahmad Gamal Ahmad Mahmoud, a student at al-Azhar University from Sharqya governorate, said he was accommodated by a family of Muslim Brotherhood members in Cairo. He took part in the Rabaa Square sit-in in 2013, which was violently dispersed by Egyptian police. Mahmoud was tasked with monitoring police checkpoints and tracking the prosecutor general's convoy. He was given a map of the prosecutor general's house and the surrounding neighborhood, as well as other information about the convoy, including that it consisted of three cars and a motorcycle.

Another convict, Abul-Qasem Ahmad Ali Mansour, confessed that he was assigned by Moussa to purchase a number of cars which were used for carrying out the operation. He used an identification card lost by a woman at a post office to complete the purchases.

The confessions suggested that the explosive charges were made at a farm in the Sharqya governorate and were transported to an apartment in the Giza governorate city of Sheikh Zayed. "The explosive charge which is made up of 80 kilograms of omnium was placed in a car and exploded remotely by a remote-control device" said Abul-Qasem. After the

explosion, Abul-Qasem confessed that "we all fled the scene, hiding among the passersby and took a waiting Hyundai car at the end of the street where the operation was implemented." They also said "we tried to carry out the operation on June 27, 2015, but when the route of the convey had changed, we postponed it to the following day" ([Al-Youm Al-Sabae](#), February 20).

No information is yet available indicating that Moussa was active in any other militant operation after Barakat's murder. However, it seems he has an extensive network in Egypt and communicates with Muslim Brotherhood members online. The Egyptian authorities now must work to identify his network in the country and launch preemptive attacks to dismantle it.

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## A Profile of Taliban Fundraiser Anas Haqqani

*Sudha Ramachandran*

On February 12, the Taliban announced the 14-member team who would negotiate with U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in Doha, Qatar later that month. Among the names in its list was Anas Haqqani, son of the late Jalaluddin Haqqani, the founder and leader of the Taliban-affiliated Haqqani Network, and half-brother of Sirajuddin Haqqani, the present leader of the network and one of the two deputies to the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada. The Taliban called for Anas' release from prison so that he could "play his part in the new negotiating team" ([Pajhwok](#), February 12).

Since October 2014, when he was arrested in Bahrain by U.S. officials, Anas has been held at Pul-e-Charkhi jail in Kabul. Turning down the Taliban's demand for Anas' release, the Ashraf Ghani government noted that the Taliban was using the talks as a "pretext" to secure Anas' freedom ([Ariana News](#), February 23). Consequently, when talks between Khalilzad and the Taliban began in Doha on February 25, Anas was not at the negotiating table ([The News](#), February 26).

### Fundraiser

Unlike his father, Jalaluddin, who was renowned for his expertise in guerrilla warfare against the Soviets during their occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, or his elder brother, Sirajuddin, who is a *skilled* military tactician and strategist,

Anas is "neither well-known nor skilled in military affairs," an Afghan government official said. Indeed, little is known about his early years or his role in the Haqqani Network. It was only when he was arrested in 2014, along with another Haqqani Network leader, Hafiz Rashid, that Anas came into the media spotlight. [1]

Upon his arrest, Afghanistan's intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), described Anas as a fundraiser for the Haqqani Network in Arab countries. It drew attention to his "special skills" with computers and described him as "one of the masterminds" of the Haqqani Network's "propaganda through social media" ([Khaama Press](#), April 20, 2016). However, the Taliban maintains that he has no affiliation with the group. In a statement issued at the time of Anas' arrest, the Taliban described him as a "Talib-ul-ilm (student] in his last year of studies." It pointed out that Anas neither figured in any of the U.S. lists of wanted persons nor did he hold "any positions" in the Taliban ([Arrahmah](#), October 20, 2014).

### Death Sentence

Soon after their arrest by U.S. authorities, Anas and Rashid were handed over to the Afghan government. In 2016, the two were put on trial and sentenced to death ([Zee News](#), August 29, 2016)

Afghan parliamentarians have often called for the "prompt execution" of Taliban and Haqqani Network prisoners, especially Anas ([Outlook Afghanistan](#), October 23, 2017). Major terrorist attacks carried out by the Haqqani Network have been followed by mass demonstrations calling for Anas' hanging. This was the case after the

suicide bombing in Kabul on May 31, 2017, which left at least 90 people dead and hundreds of others injured. Civil society activists and others marched on the streets of the Afghan capital demanding the execution of Anas and other Taliban and Haqqani Network prisoners ([Tolo News](#), June 1, 2017).

Over the years, the Ashraf Ghani-led government has executed several Taliban and Haqqani Network prisoners in its custody ([Khaama Press](#), May 8, 2016; [Gandhara](#), June 3, 2017). However, it has refrained from carrying out Anas' death sentence so far.

The Ghani government's reluctance to execute Anas is partly due to the likelihood of Taliban retribution. The Taliban and Haqqani Network can be "expected to unleash violence across Afghanistan" should it hang Anas [2]. In 2017, when President Ashraf Ghani gave his assent to the hanging of 11 Taliban and Haqqani Network prisoners on death row, the Taliban warned of "harsh exemplary attacks," including the killing of foreign hostages it holds ([Gandhara](#), June 3, 2017). The execution of Anas can be expected to provoke an "even more savage response" from the Haqqani Network. [3]

### **Bargaining Chip**

The Taliban has called for the release of Taliban and Haqqani Network prisoners in exchange for Kevin King and Thomas Weeks. Professors at the American *University* of Afghanistan in Kabul, King and Weeks have been held by the Haqqani Network since their abduction in August 2016. Anas tops the Taliban's list of prisoners it wants freed in this exchange ([Express Tribune](#), January 14, 2017).

The Afghan and U.S. governments have apprehensions over releasing Taliban-Haqqani Network prisoners, as they could return to the battlefield to fight Afghan and U.S. forces. Recently, this was the case with regard to the release of former Taliban army chief and Guantanamo detainee Mohammad Fazl (See [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), March 5). Although this is not a concern in Anas' case, given his lack of fighting expertise, freeing him would boost the Haqqani Network's fundraising capability.

Afghan analysts believe that the Taliban-Haqqani Network's participation in the ongoing talks with the U.S. is tactical. Apparently, the Haqqani Network is hoping to secure the release of Anas under an exchange deal with the U.S. (See [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), November 2018). Should the Afghan government release Anas at an early stage of the negotiations, the Haqqani Network's motivation for remaining in this process would decline, putting pressure on the Taliban to withdraw from the talks. Keeping Anas alive and in jail for as long as possible rather than hanging or freeing him at this juncture is in the interest of those who support the ongoing talks between Khalilzad and the Taliban. Potential spoilers could push for his execution as that would spell the end of the talks.

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### **Notes**

[1] Author Interview with a Kabul-based Afghan government official, March 28.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

## Post-Mortem Analysis: Key Kenyan al-Shabaab Commander Shaykh Iman Ali Killed in Airstrike

*Sunguta West*

A military airstrike in southern Somalia on March 22 killed Shaykh Ahmed Iman Ali, a.k.a. Zunira, a deadly and influential Kenyan-born al-Shabaab militant leader.

Ali, who was a fast-rising militant leader within al-Shabaab, or *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen*, died alongside another 40 middle-level commanders. The strike is believed to have been carried out by the U.S military, targeting a building in the town of Bu'aale in the Middle Juba region. The commanders had assembled for a planning meeting in Bu'aale, which is located north of Jilib—the current headquarters of al-Shabaab ([Strategic Intelligence](#), March 25; [Nairobi News](#), March 25).

For several years, al-Shabaab has used Bu'aale as a base for logistical planning and training. The town is the traditional capital of the Middle Juba region. The group has built a large prison there, where it detains captured African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) soldiers ([Strategic Intelligence](#), March 25).

### **The Significance**

The killing of Ali is a significant development in the battle against al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's terror network affiliate in East Africa, which, under AMISOM, has been the target of a campaign involving the militaries of multiple African nations.

His death is another in a long line of recent blows to the militant group, which has been weakened following the recent killings of key leaders by U.S. airstrikes. In September 2014, an airstrike near the town of Barawe killed Shaykh Ahmed Abdi Godane, one of the group's emirs who had attempted to shape al-Shabaab into a regional jihadist group. Godane, a.k.a Abu Zubeyr, had replaced Shaykh Adan Hashi Ayro, who also died in another airstrike in the town of Dhusamareeb.

In the case of Ali, the militant leader played a key role in the group's expansion since 2012, establishing jihadist cells in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and most recently in Mozambique ([Daily Nation](#), March 27).

These actions earned him a position as the *de facto* leader of the foreign African fighters within al-Shabaab. As a commander of the Jayshi al-Ayman—a deadly wing of al-Shabaab that had been operating from Boni, a forest in Kenya's Lamu County—he acted as the bond between foreign fighters. His killing will limit the operations of the group.

Reports say that his death has triggered chaos within the groups of foreign fighters who were under his command. Looking at past patterns, many of them fear they will be executed by the group's top leaders who have been using killing, beheadings and torture to enforce loyalty ([Standard Digital](#), April 6).

### **Early Life**

Born in either 1973 or 1974, his parents saw Ali acquire a good education, completing his

university studies with a bachelor's degree in engineering from the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT). Some sources say he graduated around 1997 or 1998, while others say it was 2001. He was later employed by the international oil and gas companies Shell and Mobil as an engineer ([Daily Nation](#), January 30, 2012).

In Majengo, a slum near Nairobi's Eastleigh neighborhood—popularly known as Little Mogadishu due to its many ethnic Somali residents—Ali grew up as an ordinary and polite slum youth. During that time, he participated in religious, social and political activities through the slum's Pumwani Riyadhha Mosque. Those who heard him preach describe him as a persuasive cleric. As a Muslim youth leader, he led the Muslim Youth Center (MYC), a community based organization attached to the mosque. He founded MYC in 2006, with the slogan, “preference for others.” The organization's main objective was to provide religious counseling to youth in the slum ([Daily Nation](#), January 22, 2012).

Ali also took up roles as a community mobilizer and within a short period he became well-known due to the vigor with which he carried out his duties. At some point, the young shaykh started offering bursaries, paying schools fees for needy children, and funding funeral expenses. He would also provide financial support to a long list of needy slum residents. One of his roles as a youth leader was to oversee the construction of the new mosque for the Pumwani slum as a secretary of the planning committee ([Daily Nation](#), January 30, 2012).

When he was not in the mosque, Ali would also join other youth in football practices or in matches against other teams.

### **Turning Point**

But the shaykh's turning point was in 2007, when he led youths in a violent ouster of the Pumwani Riyadhha Mosque Committee (PMRC). He had accused the committee of pocketing the mosque's income, which the mosque generated from, among others sources, storage facilities for market goods for the nearby Gikomba market.

Al-Shabaab leadership allegedly took notice of Ali's violent overthrow of the PMRC and declared him the leader of the militant group's cell in Kenya. His actions and the MYC drew the attention of security agencies. The mosque and the youth center would later come under the sharp focus of local and international security agencies following findings that the two religious institutions were being used by jihadists to radicalize and recruit youth for al-Shabaab ([Standard Digital](#), August 29, 2011).

Ali had been introduced to Islamic extremism by a radical Muslim cleric, the late Aboud Rogo, while a university student. Rogo was shot to death on August 12, 2012, after a van he was traveling in was fired on by unknown gunmen. He was allegedly taking his wife to the hospital ([Hiiraan Online](#), August 18, 2015).

In 2009, Ali fled Kenya to al-Shabaab bases in southern Somalia after frequent visits by police. In 2012, the militant group elevated Ali as a commander to lead attacks against Kenya. His elevation was made public through a statement

posted on MYC's website which has since ceased operations ([Capital News](#), January 17, 2012).

### **Accelerating Jihad**

While in Somalia, his familiarity with the East Africa region resulted in his rise as the group's media face. One of his early responsibilities included preparing and producing propaganda messages for the group. In Somalia, he produced jihadist videos through *al-Kataib*, the group's media wing, calling for more recruits and attacks throughout East Africa. This is a key strategy al-Shabaab uses to recruit, reaching jihadists and sympathizers beyond Somalia.

In a video in 2016, he emerged, celebrating the killing of Kenyan soldiers in the El Adde camp attack. In that attack, which took place on January 15, 2015, al-Shabaab forces overran Kenya Defense Forces soldiers taking part in AMISOM and killed an unspecified number of soldiers. In the video, Ali promised to turn the Kenyan flag red and threatened more attacks. His last video was in 2017, when he threatened Kenyan Muslims serving as soldiers in Somalia under AMISOM ([Standard Digital](#), February 28, 2016; [Daily Nation](#), March 27).

### **The Indictment**

In August 2015, Ali and two other hardline jihadists were named as the top Somalia-based recruiters for Kenyans who join the ranks of al-Shabaab. His recruitment tactics included offering large sums of money and rewards to desperate youths, including university students.

That same year, he was cited along with Mohammed Kuno, an ex-teacher from Garissa County in the northeastern region of Kenya, as

one of the masterminds of the Garissa University College attack, in which 148 students were killed. The government ordered a freeze of his accounts in Kenya. Kuno was later killed in a special forces operation in Farwamo, 30 kilometers north of Mogadishu ([Daily Nation](#), April 2, 2015; [Standard Digital](#), June 2, 2016).

Months before, in December 2014, the police had placed a bounty of 2 million Kenyan Shillings (approximately \$20,000) on Ali's head for the massacre of 64 people in Mandera county. He had produced yet another video, saying the killing of the 28 bus passengers and 36 quarry workers was revenge for the killing of Muslim clerics in the coastal city of Mombasa—including the late Sheikh Aboud Rogo, Abubakar Shariff Ahmad, a.k.a Makaburi, and Samir Khan.

He was named as the mastermind of the Westgate shopping mall attack in Nairobi, in which 67 people were massacred in September 2013. In January 2012, Ali declared war on Kenya on behalf of al-Shabaab ([Daily Nation](#), January 9, 2012).

Ali, a terrorist recruiter and trainer, had been on the radar of international security agencies, including the FBI. The United States declared him a Specifically Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) in 2018. According to the U.S. State Department, Ali had been an al-Shabaab leader since 2012, was the director of the group's Kenyan operations, which have targeted AMISOM troops, and was responsible for propaganda targeting the Kenyan government and civilians. The chief recruiter also fundraised

in mosques in Kenya to support al-Shabaab activities.

### **Last Turn**

After falling out with the top leadership of al-Shabaab, Ali had allegedly been on the run since 2017. According to news reports, he had become a target for execution due to actions which the top leaders perceived as too ambitious. One of the key accusations was that he had failed to remit to the organization money he had fundraised through mosques that was intended to fund the group's activities. They also accused him of harboring ambitions of becoming the emir of al-Shabaab.

Also in 2017, he reportedly sent emissaries to Kenyan authorities, seeking a pardon alongside a group of militant youths who had joined al-Shabaab. In return, he has offered to cooperate with the Kenyan government in fighting al-Shabaab in Kenya and Somalia. What happened to these advances remains unclear ([Standard Digital](#), September 6, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

The killing of Shaykh Ahmad Iman Ali is a major blow to al-Shabaab, which has been struggling to regain territory after being routed by AMISOM. Ali was key in planning attacks outside of Somalia, especially in his home country of Kenya, where he was linked to several major terror attacks. But while his demise may limit the group's operations, especially in Kenya and East Africa, it must be understood that he left behind a number of protégés who will not hesitate to take up his role. This is a fact security



services should be cognizant of, as the battle against al-Shabaab continues in Somalia.

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## **Tracing the Roots of Boko Haram's Early Financial Network: The Case of Muhammed Ilyas Bello Damagun**

*Jacob Zenn*

Although Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau publicly declared a jihad only as late as 2010, 2002 is widely recognized as the year the Nigerian jihadist group was founded. The group's leader then was Shekau's predecessor, the Salafist cleric Muhammed Yusuf, who himself was aligned with a more battle-tested Nigerian jihadist, Muhammed Ali. Shekau was a recent "convert" to Salafism at that time and had become a follower of Yusuf only several years earlier ([Vanguard](#), July 4, 2011; [ICG](#), April 3, 2014).

Because the group was then still above ground, it was able to solicit donations from a number of funders -- including from illicit sources like al-Qaeda, but also from notable wealthy individuals ([al-Risalah](#), January 2017). One of those wealthy individuals was named Muhammed Ilyas Bello Damagun. Unaware of the group's violent intentions, he became one of the funders of Muhammed Yusuf and Boko Haram in 2003. His case, therefore, represents how otherwise law-abiding citizens can become funders of jihadist groups that either hide or postpone their desire to engage in violence in their early years.

Damagun's Early Ties to Muhammed Yusuf

Muhammed Ilyas Bello Damagun was best known for being a director of one of northern Nigeria's most prominent publications, *Daily Trust* ([Vanguard](#), January 17, 2007). As his name indicates, he was from Damagun, a town in Yobe State, Nigeria. This is why he became acquainted with Muhammed Yusuf, who, like Shekau, was also from Yobe. Moreover, the base camp of Boko Haram in 2003 was in the small village of Kanama, in Yobe ([Premium Times](#), September 6, 2012). This meant Boko Haram's roots were primarily in Yobe and its neighbor to the east in Borno State.

According to an obituary by his daughter following his death in 2018, Damagun became a devout Muslim after studying in Sudan. She even wrote that he began to speak to her and her siblings only in Arabic so that they would be able to "read the Qur'an fluently" ([Daily Trust](#), February 10, 2018). An Islamic student who was familiar with Yusuf when he was preaching in 2003 also recalled that Damagun provided the funding for Yusuf's Ramadan *tafsir* (interpretation of the Qur'an) at the Yobe Islamic Center in Damatru. [1] One of the ways Yusuf and other Salafist preachers were able to win recruits was, in fact, by providing followers, including unemployed youths, with meals during Ramadan. This helped them attract a wider following.

Another preacher who Damagun funded was Shaykh Ahmed Garkawi in Kaduna State ([Daily Trust](#), February 10, 2018). It was at Garkawi's mosque in June 2009 that Yusuf rallied his supporters for jihad against the Nigerian government. The jihad itself began one month later, in July 2009. Yusuf and several hundred

followers were killed in clashes that took place in various cities in northern Nigeria, with Maiduguri, Borno State experiencing the greatest violence. Yusuf himself was killed in Maiduguri on July 30, 2009 ([Vanguard](#), July 30, 2009). By the time of Yusuf's death, however, Damagun had long abandoned Yusuf.

### **Damagun's Scandals Involving Muhammed Yusuf and Mauritania**

Damagun first gained notoriety in August 2003, when he and a Salafist cleric in Kano, Muhammed Nazifi Inuwa, were both imprisoned for a short time for sending a group of Boko Haram members to Mauritania. The youths were ostensibly sent to engage in religious training, but the Nigerian State Security Service (SSS) alleged they actually took part in military training. Damagun was, according to the SSS, the financier of the program, while Nazifi Inuwa recruited the youths for the program from the Aminu Kano College of Islamic and Legal Studies (AKCILS), where he was dean of Qur'anic studies. While the SSS alleged Damagun met Nazifi Inuwa when they were both studying in Sudan, it also alleged Damagun met another Nigerian, Muawiya Babayaro, in Mauritania while Babayaro was studying at a Saudi-affiliated institute in that country ([gamji.com](#), June 2004). The participants in the program in Mauritania who were not from AKCILS were reportedly recruited from Yobe and other states in northern Nigeria. They claimed that Nazifi Inuwa told them about the school in Mauritania, and that Babayaro brought them to their Islamic teachers in the village of Ummul Qura, Mauritania, once they arrived in the country ([ThisDay](#), July 9, 2004).

According to the SSS, suspicions were raised about Damagun because he received \$300,000 from al-Qaeda in Sudan to fund the program in Mauritania ([Daily Trust](#), January 17, 2007; [Reuters](#), February 8, 2007). While the SSS is known to often make false allegations, the U.S. Embassy in Nigeria, for its part, confirmed in a 2007 cable that Damagun was, in fact, linked to Boko Haram and there was “credible information indicating he is involved in the financing of extremist Islamic causes” ([WikiLeaks](#), January 19, 2007). When charges were brought against Damagun in 2007, the Nigerian government further alleged he donated “a minibus, 30 loudspeakers, and various sums of money” to Muhammed Yusuf “in order to facilitate the spread of extremism”, in addition to “recruiting, sponsoring and ferrying” 17 members of Boko Haram’s “militia arm” to “receive combat training on terrorism” in Mauritania ([Vanguard](#), January 17, 2007). The SSS also claimed the ostensible purpose for sending the youths to Mauritania was a “cover” for their terrorism training ([AFP](#), January 17, 2007). Such allegations were corroborated by a prominent Nigerian Salafist cleric known as Shaykh Albani, who stated in a 2009 interview that he knew a student who was supposed to participate in the program in Mauritania and was one of Yusuf’s students. The student was “to be taken to Mauritania on the pretext that they were going to study *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence)” but instead “they gave them military training” ([Nigeriabestforum](#), October 10, 2009).

Neither Nazifi Inuwa nor Damagun denied being involved in the program. However, Nazifi Inuwa claimed he was “deceived” by Damagun.

[2] Damagun himself may also have been unclear about the nature of the program. The main center for Islamic studies in the village of Ummul Qura where the youths “studied” in 2003 was founded by the prominent Mauritanian Shaykh Muhammad Salim Wadud. It was known for training foreigners from around the world in months-long Qur’anic memorization sessions in tents in the desert similar to what some of the students described when they returned to Nigeria ([Omarshahid.co.uk](#), March 2, 2016). It also would not have been out of place for Damagun to sponsor this program, as he was known for sponsoring other “scholarship tours” for young Nigerian students to learn Islam in Nigeria or abroad. [3] The very harsh conditions the students described meant whatever Islamic training they were supposed to receive did not occur.

### **Damagun’s Ends Support for Yusuf**

According to a former Boko Haram member, Damagun did indeed provide a bus and other materials to Muhammed Yusuf. However, the former member claimed Damagun did so “out of ignorance of the group’s real objectives.” [4] As a result, according to the former member, Damagun took his two sons out of Boko Haram and ceased funding Muhammed Yusuf altogether in 2003. Just several weeks after that, in December 2003, Boko Haram engaged in violent clashes with Nigerian security forces in Kanama, in which Muhammed Ali was killed. However, Muhammed Yusuf then fled to Saudi Arabia, returning to Nigeria by 2006. At that time he became the undisputed Boko Haram leader ([AFP](#), January 11, 2006).

Yusuf was ostracized from mainstream Salafists and from ideologically-aligned politicians and funders like Damagun because he continued the jihadist vision of Muhammed Ali, albeit with a greater degree of patience. Yusuf therefore no longer solicited funds from Damagun, but relied on the sophisticated organizational structure he created, according to which his followers ran farms and donated money to the group from their own businesses. One of the ironies about the case of Damagun, therefore, is that he was among dozens of unwitting supporters and funders of the early Boko Haram who meant well but had little idea about the group's actual objectives. What Damagun saw as the group being devout was, in fact, a covert jihadist project.

However, it was only after Yusuf's death in 2009 that the true nature of the group and its commitment to global jihad became visible for everyone to see. Nevertheless, Damagun was still one of the first funders to back out in 2003, even before the clashes in Kanama. While Damagun cleared his name before his death, when the history of Boko Haram is finally written, the various "inadvertent" financiers and supporters will still be part of the story of the group's origins ([BBC](#), April 2017).

## **Conclusion**

One of the important lessons from the Damagun case is that even though Boko Haram has turned violent to such an excessive degree and even aligned with Islamic State, there are still interpersonal connections between some of the group's current or recent leaders and notable individuals in society. Because of his passing,

Damagun obviously can no longer take part in any "outreach" to Boko Haram, but the most influential commander in Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), Mamman Nur, was engaging in negotiations with the government through intermediaries up until Islamic State ordered other ISWAP commanders to kill him in 2018 ([Sahara Reporters](#), September 14, 2018). Nur had facilitated ISWAP's release of more than 100 schoolgirls the group had kidnapped in March 2018 from Dapchi, Yobe State, after negotiating with the intermediaries and also receiving approval from Islamic State for their return. Abubakar al-Baghdadi had reportedly considered the girls apostates but was a) concerned about image problems resulting from conducting another "Chibok-like" kidnapping, and b) willing to accept that the girls were not actively opposing ISWAP in the way that government personnel do and that their repentance could spare their lives ([Sahara Reporters](#), April 9, 2018). Nur was killed over other issues, related to loyalty and allegedly pocketing extra money from negotiations for himself.

This is not to say notables with similar histories to Damagun will necessarily be able to establish "peace" as such with ISWAP, but they could continue to attempt to serve as intermediaries. In fact, the most successful intermediaries with Boko Haram have been lawyers and journalists; others, such as media directors and former funders like Damagun, could also conceivably extend a hand through back channels to ISWAP ([Pulse.ng](#), May 28, 2014). Certainly this would meet resistance from some Islamic State and ISWAP elements, as occurred with Mamman

Nur. However, it also should not be discounted that such discussions could lead to breakthroughs like Dapchi or even something greater.

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## Notes

[1] Interview of former student of Muhammed Yusuf in Maiduguri and Yobe, conducted online, June 2018.

[2] "Apostles of Terror," The Week [Lagos], July 26, 2004. Pg. 21, 22.

[3] Interview of former student of Muhammed Yusuf in Maiduguri and Yobe, online, June 2018

[4] Author's colleague's interview with Abu Aisha, March 2019.

## Keeping the Civil War Alive: A Profile of South Sudan's Rebel General, Thomas Cirilo Swaka

*Andrew McGregor*

A little-known five-year civil war in South Sudan has left up to 400,000 dead and millions more displaced. After the young nation gained its hard-won independence in 2011, only two years of peace followed before latent rivalries between the Dinka and the Nuer (the two largest and most powerful of South Sudan's 62 recognized ethnic-groups) resurfaced. In December 2013, President Salva Kiir Mayardit (Dinka) accused his vice president, Dr. Riek Machar Teny (Nuer), of planning a coup against the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) (for Machar, [see MLM](#), January 30, 2014). Machar denied it, but was soon leading a largely Nuer army opposed to the government—the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM-IO). In time, other ethnic groups were pulled into the struggle. [1] Many of these smaller groups (especially in Equatoria) had joined pro-Khartoum militias during the 1983-2005 Second Sudanese Civil War, creating a lasting friction with the Dinka who provided the bulk of the rebel SPLA manpower.

The first two years of the war largely avoided Equatoria, the traditional name for the southern third of the nation where there are relatively few Dinka and Nuer. A year-long peace agreement signed in 2015 could not survive growing perceptions that President Kiir's regime was promoting Dinka superiority at the expense of other ethnic groups. New tribal-based armed

movements emerged and the war erupted once more. This time, SPLM-IO forces shifted into the forests of Equatoria, with the government's Dinka-dominated Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) following them in pursuit. Equatoria's many ethnic groups were soon forming their own armed self-defense forces gathered into highly fluid alliances.

Fueling the conflict in Equatoria and elsewhere was the regime's unpopular division of South Sudan's original ten states into 28 (and later 32). Again, this was perceived as an effort to establish Dinka majorities in various regions, all governed by Dinkas appointed by and loyal to the president. Many Equatorians prefer a return to a single region rather than the current arrangement of nine small Equatorian states imposed in 2017. Southern Sudan is traditionally understood as three distinct regions - Upper Nile, Bahr al-Ghazal, and Equatoria.

With 3.5 billion barrels of proven reserves of crude oil, South Sudan should be enjoying rapid development and significant improvements in living standards. Instead, the ongoing fighting has halved oil production and most oil revenues are spent on military equipment.

### **A General from Equatoria**

The government, the SPLM-IO, and a number of smaller armed groups signed a new peace deal in August 2018, the Revitalized Agreement on Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Leading the armed opposition to the agreement and to the Kiir regime is Lieutenant General Thomas Cirilo Swaka, a member of the Bari tribe (a cross-

border group also found in northern Uganda) and a former leading general in the SPLA.

Hailing from the South Sudanese capital of Juba, Cirilo fought against the Khartoum regime during the Second Sudanese Civil War, surviving a landmine blast that left an eight-inch scar on his head. By the time South Sudan gained its independence in 2011, Cirilo was already head of the SPLA's training and research division. In February 2016, he became the SPLA's deputy chief of general staff for logistics. Having maintained a fairly low profile, he took some by surprise when he resigned from the SPLA in February 2017, becoming the second highest ranking officer to defect from the SPLA. Cirilo established a new rebel movement, the National Salvation Front (NSF), the following month. The movement is better known as "NAS," meaning "people" in Juba Arabic. At the time of his resignation, Cirilo claimed President Kiir had turned South Sudan's military, police and security services into a Dinka-dominated "tribal army" ([African News/Reuters](#), March 7, 2017).

Cirilo claims he was sidelined during the Kiir regime's worst abuses and largely powerless to stop them ([Reuters](#), May 5, 2017). A presidential spokesman, on the other hand, noted that Cirilo had a major command position in the SPLA in those years, was part of the decision-making process and therefore "bears the consequences of what the SPLA as an army has actually done" ([VOA](#), February 14, 2017).

### **Reasons for Rebellion**

When he resigned, Cirilo issued a statement claiming "President Kiir and his Dinka leadership clique have tactically and

systematically transformed the SPLA into a partisan and tribal army...Terrorizing their opponents, real or perceived, has become a preoccupation of the government.” Cirilo went on to state that extensive recruiting in the security forces was ongoing among the Dinka of President Kiir’s home region and that these forces were being deployed to occupy land belonging to other tribal and ethnic groups using methods involving rape, murder, and torture ([Reuters](#), February 11, 2017). Allegations of regime corruption, economic mismanagement and an inability to maintain law and order were also made ([Pachodo.org](#), December 2017).

In the overcharged political atmosphere of the national capital it was not surprising that the U.S. embassy in that city was compelled to refute charges in the local press that the CIA was backing Cirilo in order to overthrow the Salva Kiir government ([Sudan Tribune](#), March 16, 2017). These charges were revived in September 2018 by South Sudanese intelligence while Cirilo was touring the United States to raise support for his movement: “We are not sure of why he is gone to the U.S., but we know he is there, being sponsored by the CIA” ([East African](#) [Nairobi], September 4, 2018).

### **War in Equatoria**

President Kiir offered Cirilo an amnesty in September 2017 that would have allowed the general to rejoin the SPLA or form his own political party, but the offer was refused ([Sudan Tribune](#), September 5, 2017).

Cirilo’s troops instead clashed with Machar’s SPLA-IO in mid-October 2017 in the Kajo Keji region close to the Ugandan border. The region,

a part of Yei River State where NAS is especially strong, is a strategic transit point for rebel movements and its control allows for the importation of supplies from Uganda ([Reuters](#), October 19, 2017).

Many clashes occur in remote locations, leaving only the spokesmen for both sides as sources. Typical of the credibility issues this presents was a 2017 clash between SPLM/A-IO and the forces of Lieutenant General John Kenyi Luboron. Luboron had defected to NAS from the SPLM/A-IO only days earlier, citing internal feuds in the SPLM/A-IO leadership, neglect of the forces under General Kenyi and the “unnecessary and random promotion of officers” ([Minbane](#), July 29, 2017; [Sudan Tribune](#), July 30, 2017).

The SPLM/A-IO claimed to have quickly overrun Kenyi’s base at Nyori, forcing the defector and his men to flee into the bush. According to NAS, Kenyi repulsed two SPLM/A-IO attacks on his base before pursuing the attackers ([NAS Press Release](#), August 4, 2017, [Reuters](#), July 30, 2017).

Colonel Nyariji Jermilili Roman repeated charges of military negligence in the course of his own resignation from the SPLM/A-IO, accusing Machar of deliberately neglecting the SPLM/A-IO forces in Equatoria: “You intentionally failed to supply our forces in Equatoria with arms and necessary logistical support, an act that endangered many of our men’s lives because their capacity to defend themselves was greatly affected, hence the death of General Elias Lino Jada and General Martin Kenyi” ([Sudan Tribune](#), March 13, 2017).

General Martin Terensio Kenyi was killed in a battle in Lobonok (Jubek State) in June 2016 (for General Kenyi, [see MLM](#) March 2, 2017). General Elias Lindo was allegedly assassinated together with prominent lawyer Peter Abd al-Rahman Sule by South Sudan security agents in Uganda in 2015. Their remains were never recovered: they were believed to have been thrown into the crocodile-infested waters of the White Nile, a common method of disposing of political prisoners during the rule of Idi Amin Dada ([South Sudan Liberty News](#), August 22, 2015; [NAS Press Release](#), March 9, 2017).

Initially, Cirilo's leadership attracted other armed groups in Equatoria. Among these was the South Sudan Democratic Movement (SSDM, aka "Cobra Faction"), led by General Khalid Butrus Bora (Murle). The movement's former leader, David Yau Yau (Murle), signed a peace agreement in 2015 and joined the government, leaving the Cobra faction in the field (for Yau Yau, [see MLM](#), May 31, 2013). General Butrus, who resigned from the SPLA in 2016, warned that Dinka civilians had been issued heavy weapons and encouraged to attack Murle communities in eastern Equatoria ([VOA](#), March 9, 2017). To counter this, Butrus merged the SSDM with NAS on March 9, 2017 ([SouthSudanNation.com](#), March 9, 2017).

Cirilo's movement suffers from a near-constant shortage of ammunition, a fact well-known to their enemies. Many NAS fighters are armed solely with bows and arrows. Nonetheless, Cirilo remains defiant: "We're not going to stop. If Juba thinks that without bullets we're not going to be able to protect ourselves and our people they're wrong" ([Vice.com](#), February 15).

NAS has also been vulnerable to defections. On June 15, 2018, Lieutenant Colonel John Kaden Elisa led 137 fighters away from NAS in order to rejoin the SPLM/A-IO. Kaden insisted the men had been ordered by Lieutenant General John Kenny Latio to defect to NAS and fight the SPLM/A-IO, actions that they now regretted. Cirilo's failure or inability to provide arms and his insistence they fight the SPLM/A-IO rather than regime forces were cited as major reasons for their return to the SPLM/A-IO ([Daily Monitor](#) [Kampala], June 16, 2018).

Further defections would follow. In mid-November 2018, the SPLM/A-IO reported that Brigadier Peter Yugu Laku and Colonel Augustino Modi had returned to the SPLM/A-IO with "90% of their fighters" after having defected to NAS in August 2017. A NAS spokesman claimed the SPLM/A-IO had then mounted a joint operation with the South Sudan People's Defense Forces (SSPDF, the re-named SPLA as of October 2, 2018) against NAS forces in Lobonok, though a SPLM/A-IO spokesman denied the operation existed and suggested that NAS "look after their own mess" ([Sudan Tribune](#), November 20, 2018).

### **The Brown Caterpillars**

South Sudan Foreign Minister Nhial Deng Nhial provided a positive report on human rights in his country to the UN's Human Rights Council (UNHCR) in April despite a massive cross-border refugee outflow from Equatoria, the biggest crisis of its type in Africa since 1994. In response, Cirilo sent a three-page letter to the council refuting the minister's claims:



The realities on the ground show that there's no peace in the country and fighting is going on as we speak... the current tragedy in the Yei River area where tens of thousands of civilians fled their homes seeking safety in the neighboring countries refutes the government's false claims... NAS forces have come under relentless attacks by the SSPDF and the [Mathiang Anyoor] militia affiliated to it ([Sudan Tribune](#), March 3).

Mathiang Anyoor ("Brown Caterpillar") is an ethnic-Dinka militia formed by former SPLA chief of general staff Paul Malong Awan (Dinka) as a personal guard for himself and President Kiir. The group, recruited largely from the Northern Bahr al-Ghazal and the Warrap region, is well-armed, though its direct connection to the army is uncertain. The militia split in May 2017 when Malong was dismissed. Some members joined Malong's new rebel movement, the South Sudan United Front/Army (SSUF/A), in April 2018 ([Sudan Tribune](#), April 9, 2018). Like NAS, the SSUF/A also refused to sign the revitalized peace agreement. Malong's attempts to run the movement from Kenya proved unsuccessful when the rest of the movement sacked him as leader in order to join the revitalized peace process ([Sudan Tribune](#), October 8, 2018). [2]

Cirilo claimed to have seen documents showing the government was delivering weapons to Mathiang Anyoor by bypassing military supply lines. A government spokesman retorted that it was unfortunate that Cirilo was going "out of his mind" ([Reuters](#), May 5, 2017).

Initial financing for the militia was provided by the chairman of the Jieng (Dinka) Council of

Elders (JCE). The JCE is a regular target of Cirilo, who charged in his resignation letter that the elders had taken command of the SPLA to pursue an ethnic cleansing of South Sudan's many other ethnic groups ([VOA](#), February 14 2017).

In early January, the SSPDF accused NAS fighters under the command of General Luboron of killing 19 civilians in Yei River State. A spokesman for the NAS-allied People's Democratic Movement (PDM) led by Hakim Dario accused Mathiang Anyoor of carrying out the killings as revenge for the loss of 15 militiamen in clashes with NAS forces in central Equatoria ([Sudan Tribune](#), January 5). NAS insisted the SSPDF had taken out its anger on local artisanal gold miners after coming off second-best in a skirmish with NAS forces ([Gurtong.net](#), January 4; [Sudan Tribune](#), January 5). Further clashes between NAS and Mathiang Anyoor in the following days resulted in the reported death of 13 more civilians and seven members of the Mathiang Anyoor ([Sudan Tribune](#), February 13).

### **Opposing the Peace Process**

According to Cirilo, the existing system of governance in South Sudan is "nothing but a dictatorship in disguise." The rebel leader has also criticized the failure to reform the security sector, "which is dominated by one ethnicity [i.e. the Dinka] out of 64" ([Sudan Tribune](#), March 3).

In September 2018, the main warring parties in South Sudan signed a peace agreement in Khartoum, with Cirilo noticeably absent. A NAS spokesman explained the rejection of the revitalized ARCSS (R-ARCSS), sponsored by the

regional Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), by calling the document “a recipe for more conflict” ([Sudan Tribune](#), September 1, 2018). [3] Cirilo’s NAS was joined by the PDM, the Pagan Amum Okiech led SPLM-Former Political Detainees (SPLM-FPD) and a number of armed groups in refusing to sign the agreement.

Cirilo became chairman in October 2018 of the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA), a largely Equatorial coalition of non-signatory groups. A rival SSOA coalition led by Gabriel Chang Changson favored the R-ARCSS. A reorganization of the non-signatory groups occurred in March, when the PDM left the SSOA in favor of another coalition, the National Alliance for Democracy and Freedom Action (NADAF). [4] The rest of the SSOA formed the Cirilo-led South Sudan National Democratic Alliance (SSNDA).

Cirilo’s SSNDA consists of NAS, the National Democratic Movement (NDM) of Dr. Lam Akol Ajawin (Shilluk), the United Democratic Republic Alliance (UDRA) of Dr. Gatwech Koang Thich (who identifies himself as a research scientist at the United States Naval Air Warfare Center and a NASA research fellow) and a faction of the South Sudan National Movement for Change (SSNMC) led by Vakindi L. Unvu ([Sudan Tribune](#), February 11). [5]

The greatest difference between the rival coalitions is that the SSNDA favors the redivision of South Sudan’s current 32 states to the 10 that existed at independence, while NADAF favors a return to the traditional three states of South Sudan ([Sudan Tribune](#), March 26). [6]

In November 2018, South Sudan Vice President Wani Igga warned that all non-signatory groups would be declared terrorist organizations at the end of an eight-month period. More recently, IGAD has confirmed there will be no renegotiation of the R-ACRSS and Cirilo turned down a personal meeting with IGAD’s special envoy, sending a delegation instead ([East African](#) [Nairobi], March 7; [IGAD Press Release](#), March 14).

### Conclusion

With IGAD now threatening sanctions against him, Cirilo has little chance of attracting international or even regional support for his wish to strike a more favorable peace deal. Lacking an external source of arms and ammunition, Cirilo’s NAS is now facing growing military pressure. With the regime and Machar’s SPLM/A-IO now reconciled (at least temporarily), the SSPDF joined with Machar’s forces in February to launch an offensive against NAS fighters in central and western Equatoria. In early March, there were reports that troops of the Uganda People’s Defense Force (UPDF) had crossed the border into Equatoria, where they were in combat with NAS elements (Uganda is a strong supporter of the Kiir regime) ([Observer](#) [Kampala], March 6). Though the advent of the rainy season may provide Cirilo with some respite, the rebel leader may have to ultimately choose between reintegration with the regime or the gradual annihilation of his movement.

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## Notes

[1] Names and acronyms for South Sudanese rebel movements tend to follow the dual pattern first established by John Garang's Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) to emphasize the existence and difference between the political (SPLM) and military (SPLA) wings of the movement.

[2] Malong has made many political alliances through mass-scale polygamy, having over 100 wives.

[3] IGAD, "Revitalized Agreement of the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan," Addis Ababa, September 12, 2018, <https://www.dropbox.com/s/6dn3477q3f5472d/R-ARCSS.2018-i.pdf?dl=0>

[4] A new faction of the PDM favoring the R-ARCSS was recently formed. The People's Democratic Movement for Peace (PDM-P) is led by Josephine Lagu Yanga, daughter of Anya Nya leader Joseph Lagu.

[5] Another faction of the SSNMC, led by Bangasi Joseph Bakosoro, is a partner in the R-ARCSS ([SouthSudanNation.com](http://SouthSudanNation.com), January 3).

[6] Other NADAF partners include the Workers' Party of Upper Nile (WPUN - largely Nuer) and the Federal Democratic Party/Army (FDP/A) of Peter Gatdet Yak (Bul Nuer), the main suspect in the 2014 massacre of 400 non-Nuer people at Bentiu while acting as a SPLA-IO commander) ([Sudan Tribune](http://SudanTribune), February 9).

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