

MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

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The Kashmir Crisis: Is Hizbul Mujahideen Chief Syed Salahuddin Still Relevant?

Sudha Ramachandran

On September 1, Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) chief Syed Salahuddin called on the Pakistani government to send its military to Kashmir to protect the people there from the Indian security forces. If the United Nations does not send peacekeepers there, he said, "it is binding upon the armed forces of Pakistan, to enter Kashmir to militarily help the people of the territory," adding that "in these testing times...mere diplomatic and political support is not going to work." Salahuddin was speaking at a gathering of his supporters in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan-administered Kashmir (PaK), the part of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir that has been under Pakistani control since 1947 ([First Post](#), September 2).

The "testing times" that the HM chief referred to is the ongoing crisis in India-administered Kashmir. On August 5, the Indian government's announced the revocation of Article 370 of the Constitution, which provided the state of Jammu

and Kashmir with autonomy. In the weeks since this controversial decision, the situation in the Kashmir Valley has been tense and India has clamped down on local protests ([The Caravan](#), September 22).

Pakistan has been raising the issue in various global forums to rally the international community against India's unilateral decision. Simultaneously, Prime Minister Imran Khan has threatened to go to war with India and has promised to teach the country a lesson ([India Today](#), August 30). He has promised "to do everything possible" to support the Kashmiri people in their struggle against India ([India Today](#), August 26).

In the past, such support to Kashmiris has taken the form of arms and training to Kashmiri and Pakistani militant groups. India's security establishment fears that Pakistan will step up such support in the coming months. Infiltration of militants from PaK into the Valley is growing ([NDTV](#), September 18). In Pakistan, religious extremists, anti-India militants like Salahuddin, as well as politicians are calling for "a jihad" to "liberate" Kashmir from Indian rule ([Express Tribune](#), August 25). Will the latest phase of the

Kashmir militancy see a revival of Salahuddin's stature in the Valley?

Pakistan's Protégé

Salahuddin was among the first generation of Kashmiris who crossed into PaK from the Valley in 1989-90 to receive arms and training from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to fight the Indian state. His pro-Pakistan leanings and willingness to do its bidding caught the attention of the ISI, which then assisted in organizing HM, with Salahuddin as its "supreme commander." Under Salahuddin, HM pursued Pakistan's agenda in Kashmir. It attacked the Indian security forces and simultaneously decimated pro-independence outfits like the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). Being the main beneficiary of ISI largesse, HM soon came to dominate the anti-India militancy (See [Terrorism Monitor](#), July 28, 2017).

By the end of the 1990s, HM's fortunes began fading. Kashmiris were weary of the militancy. The flow of local recruits waned. Rifts between HM's PaK-based leadership and its Valley-based commanders and fighters came to the fore ([The Statesman](#), May 7, 2002). The latter criticized Salahuddin for living in comfort in PaK. Kashmiris complained that while Salahuddin's five sons pursued regular careers in the Valley, their own children were dying in the fight against India. Between 2000 and 2015, it was the predominantly Pakistani (rather than Kashmiri) Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba that were Pakistan's new protégés. Salahuddin was better known in this period for his periodic anti-India tirades than expertise in fighting the Indian forces.

Hizbul's Revival

HM's fortunes improved in 2015-16, when its south Kashmir commander Burhan Wani captured the imagination of Kashmir youth ([Rising Kashmir](#), July 6, 2017), who joined the HM in droves. Unlike militants of the 1990s, this

new generation of HM fighters is tech-savvy and active on social media ([Outlook](#), July 8, 2018). During this period, Salahuddin's stature in terrorist circles received a boost when the U.S. State Department declared him a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in June 2017 ([Terrorism Monitor](#), July 28, 2017).

However, HM has also suffered losses over the last couple of years. It has lost several charismatic commanders and fighters to Indian counter-insurgency operations, including Burhan Wani. Old tensions between the PaK leadership and the Valley commanders continue to sap HM's strength on the ground. Importantly, new terror groups pledging loyalty to transnational jihadism have emerged in the India-administered Kashmir. Islamic State (IS) now claims to have an Indian "province" known as Wilayah al-Hind. A bitter power struggle is unfolding between various Pakistan-backed anti-India groups and the global jihadists. The anti-India militant field in Kashmir has become more complex ([Asian Affairs](#), August).

Whither Salahuddin

Over the past 15 years, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed have been the main executors "sword-arms" of Pakistan's anti-India policy in Kashmir. The post-Article 370 phase of the militancy, which is expected to see more bloodshed than earlier phases, could see the re-emergence of HM as Islamabad's main "sword arm" in its proxy war against India. Pakistan needs a Kashmiri group that will follow its orders to fight its war in the Valley, and HM and Salahuddin strongly meet this criteria.

The mood in the Valley is strongly anti-Indian, but it is not pro-Pakistani. Many Kashmiri youth want independence from both countries. A growing number have become radicalized and is drawn to the fiery rhetoric of global jihadists. They may not be willing to take orders and instructions from Islamabad. 73-year-old Salahuddin may not be able to fire the

imagination of the new generation of militants in the Valley.

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Sheikh Khamis Farhan Ali al-Khanjar al-Issawi—The ‘Swashbuckling’ Millionaire Turned Political Leader of Sunni Iraq

Nicholas A. Heras

The Salafist-jihadist Islamic State (IS) organization has been regaining strength in the Sunni Arab majority areas of central, western, and northern Iraq over the course of the last year. Leaders of the Iraqi Sunni Arab armed groups that have fought against IS, and other Iraqi Sunni Arab notables, have been the subject of a growing campaign of assassination and the targeted destruction of their properties by IS operatives. As a result of this IS campaign, an increasing number of Sunni Arab leaders are distancing themselves from the Shia-dominated Iraqi central government, which is currently led by Prime Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi, who is believed to be close to Iran. One of the most powerful Sunni Arab Iraqi leaders who still works closely with the current Iraqi government under the leadership of Prime Minister al-Mahdi is Sheikh Khamis Farhan Ali al-Khanjar al-Issawi.

Sheikh Khamis, 54, is one of the most controversial and prominent Sunni Arab businessmen in Iraq, and increasingly since the campaign against IS began in 2014, one of the more public and important socio-political leaders within the Iraqi Sunni Arab community. In the period after the fall of the Saddam Hussein government in 2003 and prior to the start of the war against IS in 2014, Sheikh Khamis served more as a quiet powerbroker within Iraq’s Sunni Arab community, while retaining a public political role within that community, at times supporting the Shia-dominated central government in Baghdad, and at other times actively opposing it. [1] Currently, Sheikh

Khamis is the secretary general of the “Arab Project in Iraq,” which is a political party that seeks to create pan-communal cooperation in Iraq after the war against IS, but is also especially concerned with the state of Iraq’s Sunni community, which has suffered mass casualties, mass displacement, and large-scale property loss over the course of the war against IS ([Iraq Newspaper](#) [Baghdad], September 26; [YouTube](#), May 9, 2018; [YouTube](#), February 15, 2017).

Sheikh Khamis is a native of the restive city of Fallujah, in central-western Iraq, and is also one of the powerbrokers within the Albu Issa Arab tribal confederation, one of the larger and more powerful Arab tribal organizations within Iraq’s Sunni Arab community. The Albu Issa Arab tribal confederation claims to have three million members, the majority of which are in central, western, and northern Iraq ([YouTube](#), August 20; [Ahewar](#), October 16, 2011). Although Sheikh Khamis does not come from a sheikhly lineage from within the Albu Issa, as a result of his personal fortune and the wide range of charitable and humanitarian projects that he finances, especially for Iraq’s Sunni Arab community, he is believed to have obtained the rank of sheikh within his tribe ([YouTube](#), August 20; [al-Jazeera](#) [Doha], June 9, 2016). [2]

Prior to the removal of the Saddam Hussein government by the U.S.-led Coalition in 2003, Sheikh Khamis helped run his family’s mercantile agricultural business, which was based in Baghdad, utilizing the family’s farmland in Anbar and Salah al-Din governorates, and was especially focused on cross-border trade into and out of Iraq. Sheikh Khamis is believed to have run the family’s trade in sheep, which was especially dependent on the use of trucks to move livestock into and out of Iraq and allegedly allowed him the opportunity to oversee a burgeoning business in bringing illicit goods into Iraq ([al-Balad News](#) [Baghdad], April 17, 2013). He is further alleged to have gone into business

with Saddam Hussein’s sons during the 1990s, at the height of the United Nations-imposed sanctions regime on Iraq, moving cigarettes and luxury goods into Iraq, and also oil out of Iraq to be sold on the black market ([al-Masalah](#) [Baghdad], November 11, 2016; [Reuters](#), June 1, 2016; [Ahewar](#), October 16, 2011).

It was during the 1990s that Sheikh Khamis first left Iraq to establish satellite offices of his family’s business in the Gulf, especially in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. During that time, he is believed to have developed a close friendship with the ruling family of Qatar and became familiar with several members of the Saudi royal family ([al-Jazeera](#) [Doha], June 9, 2016). Since the 1990s, Sheikh Khamis has steadily built up his business into a multinational enterprise with interests throughout the Middle East, in Europe, Asia, and in the United States ([The Daily Beast](#), July 12, 2017; [Reuters](#), June 1, 2016; [Ahewar](#), October 16, 2011). He has actively tried to court policymakers in the United States, where he has retained an active lobbying effort through prominent Washington, D.C. firms ([Politico](#), June 14; [Reuters](#), June 1, 2016). Sheikh Khamis is believed to be a close personal friend of Qatar’s current ruler, Sheikh Tamim al-Thani, and although he is believed to be friendly with the Saudi royal family, his close relationship with the Emir of Qatar is believed to have led to tensions between Sheikh Khamis and leading Saudi officials. [3]

In addition to his role as a businessman and politician, Sheikh Khamis has also been a major financier of armed groups within the Sunni Arab community in Iraq, especially in and around his ancestral home in Fallujah. During the war against IS, he helped fund the recruitment, mobilization and arming of at least 5,000 fighters, especially from the Albu Issa tribe in and around Fallujah, to fight IS ([YouTube](#), May 27, 2016). [4] These Sunni Arab tribal fighters, although not formally under the command of Sheikh Khamis, continue to be mobilized and

are being incorporated into the Hash Shaabi (PMU-Popular Mobilization Units) structure ([YouTube](#), November 14, 2016). His influence over Sunni Arab PMUs in Anbar governorate, an area of high interest for both the government in Baghdad and for foreign actors, increases his leverage on Iraq's socio-politics and security dynamics. [5] However, prior to the war against IS, Sheikh Khamis was notoriously linked to providing funds for Sunni Arab armed groups that fought against the U.S.-led Coalition and the Iraqi government in Anbar and Salah al-Din governorates, including allegations that his funding supported armed groups that were tied to Salafist-jihadist organizations, including al-Qaeda in Iraq ([The Daily Beast](#), July 12, 2017; [Reuters](#), June 1, 2016; [Kitabat](#) [Baghdad], February 1, 2013). In 2015, he was also charged—though never put on trial or convicted—by the Iraqi state for being tied to financing fighters who supported IS, a charge that fits detractors' general narrative that he is a sketchy figure who supports violent extremist Sunni Islamist organizations in Iraq ([Okaz](#) [Riyadh], July 29; [The Economist](#), January 5, 2017; [al-Jazeera](#) [Doha], June 9, 2016).

Sheikh Khamis is one of the most powerful Iraqi Sunni Arab leaders with a demonstrable base of influence and power in the Sunni-majority, formerly IS-controlled areas of Iraq. In the post-IS period, Sheikh Khamis is also the closest that the Sunni Arab-majority communities of Iraq have to a champion who is able to move freely and is welcomed in capitals across the Middle East, in Europe, and in the United States. Also, steadily since 2003, Sheikh Khamis has become one of the few spokespersons for Iraq's Sunni Arab community who has credibility with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, even if he has disputes with powerful foreign backers of the community, such as Saudi Arabia. This fact makes him an important person of interest for powerful foreign actors—especially the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia—seeking to have a dominant role in the future of Iraq. His personal importance to

the effort of stabilizing the Sunni-majority areas of western and central Iraq is becoming more emphasized, especially as IS has begun to surge again in these areas of Iraq. Sheikh Khamis may seem to be everything to everyone, which is intentional, as in order to survive the contested, bitter, and frequently deadly game of socio-politics in post-Saddam Iraq, he has to play multiple roles that satisfy multiple, stronger actors, most of whom are foreign powers. This tribal leader turned millionaire turned politician and anti-IS fighter is likely to remain one of the most swashbuckling and key Sunni Arab leaders in Iraq.

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Notes

[1] Author interviews with a Washington, D.C. area-based analyst from Iraq who has knowledge of Sheikh Khamis and his relationship with Gulf Arab countries. Interviews conducted in September 2019.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

Waleed Ahmed Zein: The Dangerous Terrorist Financier of Kenya

Sunguta West

In July 2018, Kenya's anti-terrorist police unit stormed a terrorist network suspected to be conducting financial operations for Islamic State (IS). After the operation, Waleed Ahmed Zein was identified as the network's top leader.

A 27-year-old man from the coastal city of Mombasa, Zein had allegedly used associates to conduct extensive transactions, which included receiving money from around the world. His father, Ahmed Zein Ahmed, a prominent businessman who dealt with motor vehicle spare parts in Mombasa, is prominent in terror circles, where he is known as Abu Waleed ([KBC](#), July 5, 2018).

The young Zein reportedly established a worldwide network to move money for IS, which he and other terror financiers had sourced through their global connections. The network spanned Europe, the Middle East, the Americas and East Africa ([Daily Nation](#), September 9, 2018).

By the time Kenyan police discovered the network, IS had already established a presence in East Africa and was gaining ground. At the time, the Middle East terror organization is believed to have viewed Africa as strategic landing point, after losing control of most of its territory in Iraq and Syria.

The signs of the group's presence in East Africa began emerging in 2015, when Shaykh Abdulkadir Mumin—an ideologue formerly associated with al-Shabaab—defected from the al-Qaeda affiliate and declared allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. Mumin and a small band of fighters moved to a mountainous region in the semi-autonomous state of

Puntland, from which they have conducted some low-level attacks ([Citizen Digital](#), April 16).

Since then, the group has reportedly maintained a small, determined and loyal cell in the region. Under the leadership of Mumin, the group has been radicalizing and recruiting youths while establishing cells within the East Africa region.

In September, the Ethiopian national intelligence service said it had evidence that IS had recruited, trained and armed some Ethiopians to carry out terror attacks. A senior intelligence official said the group had for many years tried to recruit in the Horn of Africa nation. One source of its terror recruits is al-Shabaab—the al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa, whose fighters IS has been poaching and integrating into its fighting force ([Strategic Intelligence](#), April 3; [AfricaNews](#), September 23).

Zein conducted his financing operation through *hawala*, an informal banking system which is often used to move money in countries where formal banking is ineffective or does not exist. War-torn Somalia is one such example.

In recent times, the system has allegedly been used to facilitate money laundering and financing of terrorism, since there is no effective way to track it. Recently, its use in Somalia as a form of remittance has come under sharp focus over fears that it was being used by terrorists to fund their activities. In 2015, the U.S. Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs cited *hawala* in Somalia over concerns that it was financing terrorists and their activities in East Africa ([Strategic Intelligence](#), April 20, 2015; [Standard Digital](#), April 18,).

Zein sent an estimated \$150,000 to IS fighters in Syria, Libya and Central Africa between early 2017 and June 2018 through the method. He allegedly paid Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) at least once, according to a report by New York University's Congo Research Group ([Standard Digital](#), April 18).

The money was deposited in his personal account and declared as proceeds from his father's automobile spare parts business in Mombasa. He used intermediaries to avoid detection and evade arrest ([Daily Nation](#), September 9, 2018).

In July 2018, however, the police caught up with him, arresting Zein and charging him with financing terrorism. One of his key associates was identified as Halima Adan Ali, a 34-year-old female Islamist militant—also from the coastal city of Mombasa (See [MLM](#), July 2).

Ali was shaped into another financier, supporter, and recruiter. She has emerged at a time when the role of women as facilitators of terrorist activities has become a key focus of both local and international security actors across the world.

Alongside Ali, Zein was accused of facilitating terrorism and providing property for commission of terrorism. He was later released on a \$10,000 bond and asked to hand over his travel documents to the court.

The money for the bond came through his father Ahmed, who channeled funds through sympathizers from Syria, where he has been based since 2014.

It believed that the bond payment was made on the orders of Ahmed, who after paying the bond encouraged Ali, the female jihad financier, to switch her allegiances from al-Shabaab to IS.

Driven by common interests, there are also indications that Ali and Zein built a bond that could lead to marriage. The plan was to allegedly travel to Syria after getting married, but the arrests thwarted those plans ([KBC](#), July 5, 2018).

For some years, Zein worked as a long-distance truck driver in East Africa, a job that allowed him to travel through a number of African countries, including the Democratic Republic of

Congo. The long-distance trips between Mombasa and Kinshasa—which include stopovers in Kampala, Kigali and Goma and are often undertaken at night—masked his activities as a terror financier.

In Mombasa, he had ran a fleet of Tuk Tuks, the motorized auto-rickshaws commonly which are used for human transport and goods in Asia and South America and more recently have become common in Africa. He also worked in a brokerage firm in Nairobi's central business district. Details of his work with that firm have remained scanty ([KBC](#), July 5, 2018).

In September 2018, the U.S. government placed sanctions on Zein. The State Department listed him as a dangerous terrorist on the accusation that he headed a global network of financial facilitators for IS. The sanctions blocked Zein from any finances or property he may directly own in the U.S. ([Daily Nation](#), September 9, 2018).

With reports that Zein had established a worldwide network to move money for IS in Africa, it is a clear indication that the terror group is gaining a foothold in the continent. The terror funds were sourced through a global network in which Zein allegedly used associates to transact, receive and move the money around the world. His use of the *hawala* system calls for greater restrictions on the method of transferring funds and other transactions, including through banks. Otherwise, every cent that goes to a terrorist increases their ability to carry out an attack. Initially it was al-Shabaab, which is known to rely on such transfers, and now IS. Governments, security experts and experts in terrorism have to move with urgency to respond to this situation.

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Sahelian Jihadists with the Islamic State in Libya: A Post-Mortem Profile of Abu Asim al-Sudani

Ludovico Carlino

On July 11, 2019, Islamic State’s (IS) weekly publication *al-Naba* released a tribute to a “martyred” Sudanese fighter who had initially fought for IS’s West Africa *wilaya* (province) (ISWAP) and eventually was killed while fighting in Libya under the banner of the local *wilaya* there. The militant path of Abu Asim al-Sudani does not represent an isolated case. Since the emergence of the IS *wilaya* in Libya (ISL) in 2014, hundreds of jihadists from the Sahel and other African regions have joined the group in the North African country, attracted by the only experiment of a Caliphate state established by the group beyond Syria and Iraq ([Alarab](#), July 20, 2016; [Afrigatenews](#), January 11). According to some estimates, more foreigners were fighting with ISL than locals. [1] However, what emerges from Abu Asim al-Sudani’s story is not only the relationship between ISL and ISWAP, but, most importantly, the fact that Libya remains the top destination for regional jihadists willing to continue their fight. This is a dangerous trend considering the new opportunities that the current Libyan civil war is opening up for IS to revive its insurgency in the country.

The *al-Naba* Biography

According to the biography provided by *al-Naba*, Muhammad Ahmad Ali Bilo al-Fallata (a.k.a. Abu Asim al-Sudani), was born in 1989 in an unspecified location in Sudan ([Jihadology](#), July 11). The account goes on to reveal that al-Sudani spent his adolescence in Saudi Arabia, where the development of his jihadist ideology was triggered by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The article states that al-Sudani increasingly

began watching and reading jihadist propaganda, especially propaganda material featuring the infamous Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who at that time was the emir of the IS’ predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq. Sudanese media also maintain that at that time Saudi authorities arrested several of al-Sudani’s comrades and teachers. That crackdown pushed him to become quite active in the media arena, supporting and spreading jihadist ideology online ([Sudanile](#), July 12, 2019). The biography also claims that al-Sudani had an educated background, having studied computer science at the International University of Africa in the Sudanese capital Khartoum, where he returned to complete his post-graduate studies. According to *al-Naba*, al-Sudani attempted to join a jihadist organization on several occasions while in Sudan. He was likely on the radar of the local authorities, as he was arrested several times between 2010 and 2014 and accused of plotting attacks to be carried out in the country ([Arabnn.net](#), July 12).

In 2015, al-Sudani managed to leave the country and join ISWAP (it is unclear whether it was in Nigeria or Chad, the two countries where ISWAP is active), at a time when militants from Boko Haram had pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ([al-Jazeera](#), November 12, 2015). Sudanese media reports indicate that al-Sudani was arrested in Chad alongside others from ISWAP, who were allegedly in the country to plot a series of terrorist attacks ([Sudanile](#), July 12). Regional media reported that he was extradited to Sudan in 2016, where he remained in prison until sometime in 2017 ([Arabnn.net](#), July 12). After his release from prison, al-Sudani decided to try joining another branch of IS, ending up in Libya after crossing the Libya-Chad border ([218tv.net](#), July 12, 2018). Al-Sudani’s shift in membership represents a further confirmation of the on-going strategic cooperation between different local IS branches—in this particular case, between ISL and ISWAP—thanks to the easy flow of weapons

through the Sahel and the undetected movement of fighters. On July 5, for instance, ISWAP for the first time published propaganda material taken by a drone, a tactic initially seen in Syria and Iraq, but later emerging in Libya, and which was likely transferred to ISWAP ([Twitter.com/Minguspozar](https://twitter.com/Minguspozar), July 9).

According to *al-Naba's* article, al-Sudani was in Libya around the time “the Crusader campaign against the Islamic State was its fiercest”—a likely reference to the military offensive spearheaded by militias from the city of Misratah in 2016 and supported by U.S. airstrikes. At this time the group was at the peak of its strength in Libya and in control of the coastal city of Sirte and surrounding areas ([Middle East Eye](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/libya-isis-2016), December 1, 2016; [al-Jazeera](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/19/libya-isis-2017), January 19, 2017). His presence in Libya corresponds with multiple reports from that period of an increasing presence of African foreign jihadists in the ISL ranks, an influx of militants facilitated by the long and porous Libyan southern borders at a time of collapsing state institutions. [2] According to IS' eulogy for al-Sudani, he was killed in an undated attack carried out by the group on a police station in the village of Qanan, which was run by the Libyan National Army (LNA), a coalition of different eastern-based militias led by self-declared Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar. The LNA is currently involved in a six-month long offensive aimed at capturing Libya's capital Tripoli.

IS effectively claimed an assault on a police station in Qanan on June 3, 2018, which, according to local media, was directed by al-Sudani himself ([al-Araby](https://www.al-araby.com/news/2018/06/03/libya-isis-2018), June 3, 2018; [218tv.net](https://www.218tv.net/news/2018/07/12/libya-isis-2018), July 12, 2018). This suggests that al-Sudani was among those IS militants who left Sirte during the Misrata-led assault—leaving behind a group of militants to defend their stronghold—and who sought refuge in more isolated areas of the country to plan their reorganization ([al-Jazeera](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/29/libya-isis-2017), September 29, 2017;

[Middle East Eye](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/libya-isis-2018), August 2, 2018). Al-Qanan is a village some 20 kilometers south of Ajdabiya, a strategic location connecting both eastern and western Libya with the south.

ISL Propaganda Minister?

The fact that al-Sudani was part of that group of IS militants who did not remain in Sirte suggests that he was either a high-profile member or that he had some core competences that made him a key asset. The answer is provided by the very same *al-Naba* account, which includes details on al-Sudani's role in the organization's media apparatus. The biography states that al-Sudani was media and tech savvy thanks to his background in computer science, and that he was involved in the production of propaganda material for the group. The article goes on, emphasizing al-Sudani's own interest in the role of media as a tool to convey the message of jihad to the world, adding that he enhanced his skills by receiving training "in media technology and software, both audio and video" as well as digital security ([Jihadology](https://www.jihadology.com/news/2017/07/11/libya-isis-2017), July 11). Although the article does not say what exactly al-Sudani's media role was, several regional media portrayed him as a senior media official, while Libyan sources quoted by local media went even further, portraying him as the group's propaganda minister ([Sudanile](https://www.sudanile.com/news/2017/07/12/libya-isis-2017), July 12; [EwanLibya](https://www.ewanlibya.com/news/2017/07/12/libya-isis-2017), July 12; [218tv.net](https://www.218tv.net/news/2018/07/12/libya-isis-2018), July 12, 2018). While it is almost certain that al-Sudani played a key role in the group's media apparatus, as emphasized by the *al-Naba* article, it seems unlikely that he was in charge of the ISL information office, as he has never been identified previously as such and open-source information about him only started to emerge after his death. Moreover, it is hard to believe that such a senior leader would have conducted a raid on a police station in an isolated Libyan location—despite the strategic relevance of the location they had attacked—especially at a time when the media output of the Islamic State in Libya was at its lowest. It is far more likely that al-Sudani was associated with

one of IS' desert *sarayāt* (or brigades). The *sarayāt* are mobile units of IS militants, which since 2017 have been conducting most of the hit-and-run operations against Libyan security services in eastern and southern Libya ([Almotawasat](#), August 3, 2018; [Libyaschannel](#), July 17).

Conclusions

Al-Sudani is just one among hundreds of African foreign fighters who have been travelling to Libya to join IS there. These include a considerable number of Sudanese jihadists who have been making this journey since 2015 ([Dabanga Sudan](#), September 20, 2015). Sudan, in particular, continues to remain a key entry point for foreign militants attempting to reach North Africa, as highlighted in the June 2019 UN Security Council report on IS that reported on the movement of fighters in small numbers from Syria to Libya and Algeria through Sudan. [3] As the Libyan civil war has now entered a more violent chapter following the LNA assault on Tripoli, which began in April, this trend is set to endure, enabling ISL to continue its current process of steady re-organization, as the UNSC report had already warned. Since it is improbable that al-Sudani was the ISL propaganda minister, despite some media suggestions, his death will most likely have a minimal impact on ISL's already debilitated media operations, even though the group has surely lost a key asset in this regard. Up to this point, ISL has shown a certain degree of resilience facilitated by the local factors of the Libyan theater, such as the eastern-western divide in governance, the lack of a national army, and the absence of a unified national security body able to lead the counter-terrorism effort nationwide and share intelligence with security agencies from neighboring countries. This aspect is of particular relevance, since al-Sudani's militant trajectory from Sudan into Libya, and more specifically its membership shift from ISW to ISL, demonstrates how cooperation

between terrorist organizations across the Sahel region is a key factor enabling their continuity.

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Notes

- [1] <https://ctc.usma.edu/islamic-state-africa-estimating-fighter-numbers-cells-across-continent/>
- [2] <https://ctc.usma.edu/islamic-states-revitalization-libya-post-2016-war-attrition/>
- [3] <https://undocs.org/S/2019/570>

A Profile of Abdul Ghani ‘Ghneiwa’ Al-Kikli—The Leader of Tripoli’s Abu Salim Central Security Force

Dario Cristiani

Almost six months into the conflict initiated in April by Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) against the UN-backed Government of the National Accord (GNA) to win control of Tripoli, the military situation in western Libya remains in a stalemate (See [Terrorism Monitor](#), April 5). As of the end of September, however, fighting on the ground and in the air has again begun to intensify. Both sides are attempting to reinforce their military grip on the territory, in order to increase their bargaining power ahead of the planned peace conference that Germany will host this autumn ([Libya Herald](#), September 22; [The Libya Observer](#), September 12). As military operations regain momentum, social media in Libya started heating up again, as part of the online propaganda war for Tripoli ([The Daily Star](#), April 19).

Pro-GNA supporters on social media have often mentioned the name of Abdul Ghani al-Kikli, a.k.a. Ghneiwa, calling him and others to defend Tripoli and Libya. Al-Kikli is one of the four prominent militia leaders of Tripoli, alongside with Haithem al-Tajouri (Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigades, or TRB), Abdel Rauf Kara (Radaa – Special Deterrence Force) and Mustafa Qaddur (Nawasi). Al-Kikli is the commander of the Abu Salim Central Security Force. The Abu Salim area originally became well-known for the infamous prison the former Libyan authoritarian leader Muammar Qaddafi used to imprison and torture political dissidents, and which was home to one of the worst massacres in the recent history of Libya. Approximately 1,200 prisoners were killed in the summer of 1996 ([Human Rights Watch](#), June 27, 2006).

Al-Kikli is a particularly important figure of the current conflict in Libya, not only because he is one of the crucial leaders supporting the GNA, but also because there have been rumors that he might flee the country, fueled by regional media. In mid-September, a Saudi newspaper reported that al-Kikli was negotiating with the army his for immunity after he reportedly transferred his money and investments to Morocco ([Asharq Al-Wasat](#), September 15). The article did not elaborate on which “army” al-Kikli was negotiating with—as in Libya, there is no real, functioning army. Notably, since the beginning of the Tripoli war in April, rumors and reports suggesting that militias’ leaders and other actors were ready to escape, or shift camp, emerged often. In many cases, these reports were merely part of a broader “information war,” so reports such as these should be taken with a grain of salt. True or not, however, al-Kikli remains one of the crucial actors in Tripoli’s security architecture and one of the big militia names associated with the GNA.

Personal History and Relevance in the Libyan Theater

Al-Kikli was born in Benghazi, eastern Libya, and soon moved to Tripoli with his family. He allegedly dropped out of school at a very young age and joined his father to work in a bakery called al-Nasr in the Abu Salim district, the area where he had spent his entire life. One source reported that, before the revolution broke out, he was a fruit seller living in the same area ([Al-Araby](#), August 17, 2018). However, other sources reported that he was still in jail at the time of the revolution, specifically the Jadida prison in Tripoli. Libyan sources said that he was arrested years before after a quarrel with a group of narco-traffickers. Despite being described as a “good, well-mannered guy,” he was seemingly a part of a gang, and when he got into a dispute with one of the narco-traffickers, al-Kikli stabbed him. Citing security reports from Muammar Qaddafi’s security services, al-Kikli

was sentenced to 14 years in prison, and he left jail only once the regime began to collapse in 2011 ([Afrigate News](#), September 20, 2018).

Al-Kikli is now the leader of what is considered to be the second-largest armed force in Tripoli (though some sources rank it third), consisting of around 1,300 fighters. The group controls the areas of Abu Salim, parts of the airport road, with its camps mostly located in the areas of al-Farnaj and Ain Zara. According to documents leaked in 2016, his formal role in Tripoli is that of “Senior Director of the Tripoli Security Directorate” ([Akhbar Libya 24](#), September 22).

Immediately after the revolution, he was one of the many commanders fighting in the anti-Qaddafi forces, and he was one of the many local militia leaders who only controlled the areas in their immediate neighborhood. Immediately after his release from jail, he organized a local military council in Abu Salim and started providing basic services to the local population. In 2017, his militia opened an office to deal with complaints from the general public of Abu Salim, concerning thefts and seizure of public and private property. The militia held the ambition to eventually expand the office to take claims from all of Tripoli ([Libya Herald](#) July 17, 2017). The militia has also been active in fulfilling other roles, from dismantling prostitution networks to dealing with electricity and local governance issues ([Afrigate News](#), August 4, 2018).

Al-Kikli also began running a prison, and was allegedly working to fight “drugs and corruption” in the neighborhood. Interestingly, several sources reported that he started by arresting his friends from his teenage years ([Afrigate News](#), September 20, 2018). The motivations behind this move were unclear. A possible explanation is that it was an act of revenge against those who were part of his gang when he was arrested. Another possible reason is that he wanted to show the people of the

neighborhood that he was earnest in his claim to fight drug dealers, and that he started with those he knew, showing that personal connections did not make them safe. The focus on counter-narcotics is so significant that his militia even established a Counter-Narcotics force led by Abdul Hamid (a.k.a. al-Mudghoot), primarily located in the Ain Salah area. However, the modus operandi of this force has created several problems to al-Kikli and his men. Residents of this neighborhood often complained about harassment by al-Mudghoot’s people. In January 2018, these problems led to a small local revolt, with people blocking roads in the area and burning tires and rubbish bins in reaction to the group establishing new checkpoints. This revolt forced al-Mudghoot to remove the checkpoints and scale down the presence of his militia in the area. This incident was not isolated. In several areas of Tripoli, locals often protest against local militiamen and their abuses. This element is essential to highlight. Al-Kikli and other militia leaders in Tripoli emerged as crucial local players at a time when militias from Misrata and Zintan held outsized influence in the city. Al-Kikli and others were trusted by the locals more than these outsiders, given them greater power. However, over the past five years, these episodes of localized rebellions against local militias have increased. Haftar used the increasing tension between locals and militias to justify his military action in the Tripolitania province ([Al-Jazeera](#), May 26).

Becoming a Tripoli heavyweight

Politically and militarily, al-Kikli’s importance increased sharply between 2014 and 2015. Initially, he was among the most significant supporters of the operation “Fajr Libya” (Libya Dawn), supporting Misratan militias against Zintan forces located in Tripoli. The Zintan forces were at that time closer to Haftar when he launched Operation Karama (Dignity), the military campaign that Haftar launched in 2014

to eradicate “terrorism and extremism” (See [Terrorism Monitor](#), May 30, 2014).

In the following months, he strengthened his military positions within the capital, turning into one of its key players. Following the accords of Skhirat, which paved the road to the establishment of the GNA, he became one of the first supporters of the new government. When GNA Prime Minister Fayeaz al-Sarraj moved to Tripoli, al-Kikli joined the coalition to expel Khalifa Ghwell and his National Salvation Government (NSG). The NSG was then supported mostly by Misratans and forces close to the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood.

Interestingly, al-Kikli is considered to be, among the militia leaders in Tripoli, the fiercest opponent of both the Brotherhood and Haftar. The fact that many of the forces who are now fighting alongside al-Kikli are associated with the Muslim Brotherhood shows once again how the military operation launched by Haftar against Tripoli has united a coalition of actors who have very little in common, apart from their shared desire to defeat the LNA.

Al-Kikli was very active in the Tripoli war of the late summer 2018 and the ongoing conflict (See [MLM](#), September 2018). Last year, al-Kikli was accused of undermining the ceasefire, as accusations launched by a plethora of very diverse actors: the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) openly addressed al-Kikli in a tweet, asking him to “respect the ceasefire he signed,” but this accusation was echoed by Misratan militia leader Salah Badi and his men, who were fighting against al-Kikli in 2018 after the conflict regained momentum ([UNISMIL Twitter Account](#), September 20, 2018, [AnsaMed.Info](#), September 20, [Afrigate News](#), September 20).

At the beginning of Haftar’s military offensive in west Libya in April, the Military Information Division of the GNA said that al-Kikli was injured during the early clashes in the suburbs of Tripoli. Al-Kikli himself denied these allegations

([218 TV](#), April 5). Over the past few months, Haftar has often tried to target the positions of al-Kikli’s militia, and in August 2019 the LNA attacked the Tripoli zoo, where his Central Security Force had allegedly organized its headquarters.

Intra-Militia Troubles: The Other Dark Side of Tripoli’s Security Environment

Over the past few years, analysts and observers have focused primarily on the military confrontation at the national level: the forces of Tripoli and Misrata, and more recently Zintan, against the forces led by Khalifa Haftar. Undeniably, this is the most critical dimension of the Libyan conflict and one that is likely to define the political and military balances within the country over the coming years. At a more granular level, however, the past two years have witnessed the emergence of a more localized violence between members of the same coalition of militias, or even within the same militias. From this point of view, for the big leaders of the Libyan militias, there is a double dimension of security that they have to take into consideration. It is the fight against their national political enemies, but also the fight against internal players—often friends turned foes—who want to strengthen their position within the ranks of the organization.

Al-Kikli’s militia has suffered from these dynamics. In December 2017, Libyan media said that al-Kikli was allegedly behind the assassination of Mohammed al-Shalabi, for years considered his right arm ([Afrigate News](#), September 20, 2018). In October 2018, other reports suggested that al-Kikli forces were behind the death of Khairy al-Hankoura, another crucial member of his militia. Libyan media report that al-Hankoura broke with al-Kikli’s militia days before he was killed ([218tv.net](#), October 16, 2018).

Conclusions

“Ghneiwa” al-Kikli is more a territorial rather than ideological militia leader. He does not have a precise ideological characterization. His militia has a clear territorial dimension, and unlike other key Tripoli's militias (Radaa and the Nawasi), does not have any Islamist features. He is allegedly the most anti-Muslim Brotherhood leader among the militia leaders in Tripoli, and in the September 2018 clashes, he was considered one of the most significant enemies of Salah Badi's forces. This did not prevent him from collaborating with Misratans and other forces allegedly close to the Brotherhood to repel Haftar's military operations in the West. This dynamic makes al-Kikli a likely recipient of one of the discreet offers to change sides that Haftar sent out, particularly at the beginning of the current war, to several of Tripoli's militia leaders. Most of those offers failed, and no big name has (yet) changed sides. While media rumors suggest that al-Kikli is assessing options to leave the country, these rumors have thus far not been corroborated. As such, al-Kikli remains one of the most important actors changing Tripoli's political and security landscape. Both he and his militia will continue to play a significant role into the foreseeable future.

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