

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## IRAQ PROTESTS COULD HELP CHECK IRANIAN INFLUENCE

*Brian M. Perkins*

Anti-government demonstrations taking place in Iraq pose a new, precarious challenge for both the United States and Iran as the two countries continue to vie for influence in the region. Tensions between Washington and Tehran remain high after Iran was blamed for the large-scale attack on key oil infrastructure in Saudi Arabia. The protests began on October 1 and have been led by the country's Shia community, which has grown increasingly disenfranchised by corruption and a lack of public services and employment opportunities. The protestors' demands grew increasingly political, however, as security forces violently cracked down on the demonstrations, leaving more than 100 dead ([Rudaw](#), October 20).

Anti-government sentiment has been building over the past year as the government has made little headway in rooting out corruption and the economy continues to stagnate. While the protests are on hold until October 25 for the Shia religious observance of Arba'een, if Abdul-Mahdi's government does not offer significant con-

cessions and the results of the inquiry into the protestors' deaths is unsatisfactory, the demonstrations are likely to escalate and pose an existential threat to the viability of the current government. Muqtada al-Sadr, the popular Shia cleric and head of the Sairoon Alliance—the largest parliamentary bloc—has also publicly called for demonstrations to continue and withdrawn his support for the Adil Abdul-Mahdi-led government ([Rudaw](#), October 20).

In addition to posing a significant threat to the Iraqi government, the protests also pose a notable challenge to Iranian influence in Iraq, particularly due to the alleged involvement of Iranian-backed militias belonging to the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in the crackdown and death of numerous protesters. Reports emerged that Iranian-backed militias deployed snipers to the protests. Although the faction of the PMF responsible has not been independently confirmed, reports indicated that Abu Zainab al-Lami—the pro-Iran and Kata'ib Hezbollah-linked Head of Security for the PMF—directed the snipers ([Alaraby](#), October 17). Frustration with these militias and mistrust of Iran has been bubbling to the surface for the past year and this incident only creates further animosity. Protesters have actively denounced foreign interference, particularly by Iran, and

are likely to make a push for the government to rein in the PMF and its pro-Iran factions.

The protests and deepening mistrust of Iran and its allied PMF factions, meanwhile, provides a window of opportunity for the United States, which is seeking to check growing Iranian influence in Iraq. However, the situation is exceptionally precarious and the U.S. response cannot be seen as overly meddling in the process as it would only serve to drive a larger wedge between Baghdad and Washington. The coming weeks will be critical for the Iraqi government, the United States, and Iran. Missteps by any side will undoubtedly have significant implications, particularly if the current Iraqi administration falls.

*Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor*

## **WHAT HAPPENS TO REPATRIATED FOREIGN FIGHTERS**

*Brian M. Perkins*

The Turkish offensive in Syria and the subsequent cease-fire has brought renewed attention to the threat posed by Islamic State (IS) members and their family members who remain in prison or in camps such as al-Hol. The ceasefire as well as the seemingly inevitable resumption of Turkish military operations sparked pleas for the repatriation of those housed in the camps for humanitarian reasons as well as to mitigate the security threats posed by their escape. Countless Western leaders have extolled both the threat of returning these members to their countries and the threat posed by them escaping. There is, however, another key question that needs to be asked by the broader international community: what is happening to those repatriated by countries less equipped to evaluate or prosecute the IS-linked individuals they repatriate?

Turkey claims it wants to create a safe zone in northern Syria in order to return Syrian refugees living in Turkey, but in doing so it risks leaving imprisoned IS-linked individuals, as well as IS-linked women and children in multiple camps, unguarded or in a position to escape. Several IS fighters escaped a prison in Qamishli while riots took place at the al-Hol camp, which houses some 68,000 IS-linked family members, who are primarily women and children ([Aljazeera](#), October 13). While there is a clear threat that escapees will help rejuvenate IS in Syria or make their way elsewhere, there is also a longer term threat that those repatriated by countries with poor track records with terrorism prosecution, prison radicalization, and recidivism will easily link up with or establish IS cells at home.

Despite calls to repatriate IS-linked individuals, countless Western nations have refused to do so, noting the obvious security threats to those conducting the repatriations and to the country once they return. The Australian government, which has among the most comprehensive terrorism laws in the world, has refused to place its forces at risk and has shown little interest in bringing back its citizens ([7News](#), October 17). Similarly, the debate on whether to bring back fighters has plagued countless European nations. Meanwhile, many countries that have returned a notable amount of fighters—Bosnia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Macedonia, Morocco, and Tunisia among others—are, strikingly, those with poor

track records in deradicalization and fewer resources and mechanisms in place to evaluate, deradicalize, track, or prosecute returnees. In Kosovo, for instance, the men are often immediately detained and face prison sentences while the women and children are temporarily detained, evaluated, and often released under varying degrees of monitoring. Prison sentences for those convicted, however, have often been exceedingly short and post-release monitoring almost nonexistent. Morocco has one of the most adept counterterrorism forces in the world and yet countless cases have demonstrated the country's struggles with terrorism prosecution, prison radicalization, and recidivism—the most recent high-profile example being the mastermind of the Imlil beheadings (See [TM](#), March 12).

The threat of escape by those imprisoned or held in camps in northern Syria is undoubtedly substantial, but those who succeed still face a significant challenge in making it out of Syria alive before jumpstarting activity elsewhere. Meanwhile, those repatriated by countries lacking the resources or mechanisms to properly prosecute, monitor, or otherwise rehabilitate offenders could merely be offering them a short hiatus before they can strike again. Even in more equipped countries, the lack of evidence from the battlefield often makes prosecution challenging and prison sentences relatively short at only a few years. The lack of any sort of transparency or international organizational oversight over how repatriated IS fighters and IS-linked individuals are managed raises the significant concern of them simply cropping back up in a new location in a matter of months or years. As such, transparency and information sharing among neighboring countries and those who have repatriated IS fighters and families is going to be critical.

*Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor*

## Al-Qaeda-Linked Group HUJI-B Attempts to Regroup in Bangladesh

*Animesh Roul*

Bangladesh's Islamist landscape unexpectedly expanded with a reported resurgence of al-Qaeda-linked Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami-Bangladesh (HUJI-B—Movement of Islamic Holy War-Bangladesh) terrorist group, which has been lying dormant for over a decade. On October 2, Dhaka police arrested three senior HuJI-B operatives from the Khilgaon area of the capital city who were reportedly engaged in reviving HuJI-B's operations in Bangladesh. The arrested were identified as Mohammad Atikullah, who is in charge of HuJI-B's international relations, Nazim Uddin, secretary of HuJI-B's Dhaka operation and Mohammad Borhanuddin, who is in charge of the HuJI-B's Feni unit in Chittagong. The investigating agencies have initiated a countrywide search and sweep operation for an additional 30 or more HuJI-B members and sympathizers that came in contact with Mohammed Atikullah, who seems to be the leading financier. According to police, at least five of them are presently hiding in the capital Dhaka and the rest are in the Chittagong area.

Initial interrogation reports revealed that all three arrested operatives have combat experience from the Afghan-Soviet war, fighting alongside Taliban and al-Qaeda jihadist elements. Among these three arrestees, Mohammad Atikullah had multiple meetings with jihadist leaders in Afghanistan during the late 1990s. Atikullah, who is originally from Feni, Chittagong, reportedly returned to Bangladesh in 1998 after meeting Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar and al-Qaeda's Osama bin Laden and began working in different Quami madrasas to spread HuJI-B's grassroot network in Bangladesh. He was involved in establishing an Islamist charity named al-Ansar-Welfare Foundation before he fled to Dubai in 2006. He remained in Dubai for several years and returned to Bangladesh in March 2019. Upon his return Atikullah and two of his associates started meeting former HuJI-B's underground cadres and the family members of imprisoned HuJI-B operatives, attempting to reorganize and revive HuJI-B's operations in Bangladesh ([Daily Star](#), October 3; [Daily Star](#), October 5).

In early March, Dhaka metropolitan police stumbled upon criminal cases, like robbery, that exposed HuJI's fundraising and gun running activities in the country. Despite the decade-long dormancy of HuJI-B, there have been signs of its covert existence in the country. The arrests of two HuJI leaders identified as Hafiz Ibrahim Ghazi and Mamunur Rashid, along with 12 members of a robbery gang in the capital's Jatrabari and Rampura areas, exposed this resurgence to the public ([BDNews24](#), March 5; [BSS News](#), March 5).

### **HuJI-B's Violent Past**

Bangladesh's history is replete with HuJI-B's violent campaigns against the pro-democratic and secular Awami League (AL) political party and other civil society members. The leaders who have spearheaded the Sunni (Hanafi-Deobandi) militant movement in Bangladesh, such as Mufti Hannan, Sheikh Farid, and Maulana Abdus Salam guided both covert and overt actions of the group in Bangladesh and beyond, especially in neighboring Myanmar, where the HuJI-Arakan (named after present day Rakhine state, Myanmar) chapter was active for several years.

HuJI-B was blamed for a number of violent attacks primarily targeting AL political rallies and conspiracies to assassinate its leader Sheikh Hasina between 1999 and 2004. Under the leadership of Mufti Abdul Hannan, the HUJI-B on August 21, 2004 launched a grenade attack on Sheikh Hasina's rally in Dhaka that claimed the lives of 24 AL party workers, including a senior women affairs secretary Ivy Rahman ([Daily Star](#), August 22, 2004). Exactly three months before, on May 21, 2004, HuJI-B attempted to assassinate British High Commissioner to Bangladesh Anwar Choudhury at Hazrat Shahjalal Shrine in Sylhet. Though Choudhury escaped with minor injuries, at least three people were killed in the grenade blast at the historic shrine ([Daily Star](#), May 22, 2004).

HuJI-B conducted two other major attacks, including a bombing in Ramna Batamul, Dhaka, in mid-April 2001 that targeted a Bengali New Year celebration, and an attack in March 1999 on a cultural function of Udichi in Jessore. The masterminds of these violent attacks were Mufti Abdul Hannan—then chief of HuJI-B—and his accomplices Sharif Alam Bipul and Delwar Hossain. They were executed in April 2017 ([Dhaka Tribune](#), April 13, 2017).

### **Jihadist Lineage**

HuJI-B was banned by the Bangladesh government in October 2005 and remains one of the most violent jihadist groups in Bangladesh's history. HuJI-B is an independent affiliate of Harkat ul-Jihad al-Islami (HuJI), an early jihadist group with roots in Pakistan and Afghanistan. HUJI-B came into existence in April 1992 by war returnees of the Bangladeshi 'Volunteer Mujahedeen Corps' which took part in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Infamously known as "Bengali Taliban", HuJI-B is largely inspired by and follows the hardline Islamist ideology of al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. Its original objective was to establish Islamic rule in Bangladesh by waging jihad and killing pro-democratic forces and secular intellectuals. In fact, one of the widely known HuJI-B slogans explains its precise aim: "*Amra Sobai Hobo Taliban, Bangla Hobe Afghanistan* (We will all become Taliban and we will turn Bangladesh into Afghanistan). Much before HuJI-B was banned in Bangladesh, it morphed into Islami Dawat-e-Kafela in March 1999 to evade scrutiny. Again in 2004, HuJI-B changed its name to Islami Gan Andolon Bangladesh (IGA-B). HuJI-B, in all its formations, was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in February 2008 by the U.S. State Department. [1]

### **Rescuing Rohingyas?**

The recent arrests also signaled HuJI-B's outreach towards Rohingya refugees. Without divulging details, the investigators revealed that the three arrested HuJI-B leaders have been trying to establish a network in the Rohingya camps using two charities as a front. The funding for these charities were allegedly coming from networks in the Middle East, including Dubai and Saudi Arabia ([The Independent](#), October 4).

Evidently, the arrested HuJI-B leader Atikullah has been an ardent Rohingya sympathizer who reportedly went to Myanmar for training and participation in subversive activities. According to available media reports, he joined Rohingya groups in the early 1990s and is well-versed with the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh. With strongholds and training centers in and around Cox's Bazar—now the location of the largest Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh—and Chittagong, HuJI-B worked closely with Rohingya solidarity groups such as Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) in the past. The organization also shared operational space with other like-minded homegrown terror groups, such as Jamm'atul Mujahedeen Bangladesh (JMB), which is

sympathetic toward Rohingyas as well. Evidently, HuJI-B worked in tandem with the HuJI's-Arakan chapter and the now-defunct Rohingya Solidarity Organization, a Rohingya Muslim group based in Bangladesh.

## Conclusion

HuJI-B's expatriate leaders have tried several times in the past to revive the first jihadist group of Bangladesh with transnational linkages. In 2007 and 2010, Bangladesh-born UK citizen Golam Mostafa, also HuJI-B's UK unit chief, unsuccessfully tried to reorganize the fledgling group in Bangladesh.

The latest attempt by Mohammed Atikullah and his cohorts can be seen as a fresh revival attempt by the existing jihadist network of the HuJI-B. This attempt to reorganize one of the first Islamist groups in Bangladesh surfaced at a time when the country is struggling to cope with a fresh wave of Islamic State (IS)-inspired threats and violence in the country that started again in late April 2019. Any resurgence of old and dormant militant groups such as HuJI-B in Bangladesh is likely to overburden the already hard-pressed security apparatus and change the jihadist progression in Bangladesh.

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# Implications of the Jeddah Agreement on the War in Yemen

*Brian M. Perkins*

The Jeddah Agreement, which is the latest ceasefire deal regarding the war in Yemen, is not one that will see the Houthi rebels lay down their arms. Instead, the Saudi Arabia and UAE-sponsored agreement seeks to end the long-simmering fight that escalated sharply in August between the Southern Transitional Council and pro-Hadi forces, which comprise the bulk of the anti-Houthi coalition. While the signing of this deal will not see an end to the war, it is an essential step to begin addressing the political fragmentation that would undoubtedly see any future political settlement with the Houthis break down if left to fester.

The STC's forceful takeover of Aden in August—and the subsequent clashes that took place across Southern Yemen as the STC worked to gain control of areas outside its power base in Aden—risked plunging the country into an even more intractable conflict. At the same time, it served to solidify the STC as a formidable political and military force in Yemen that cannot viably be sidelined in any future political settlements without risking another plunge into war, much like the scenario that saw the onset of the current war following the National Dialogue Conference. Similarly, the STC-Hadi conflict illuminated the fissures between Saudi Arabia and the UAE as Saudi forces launched a counterattack and the Emiratis conducted strikes in support of the STC. In this sense, the agreement is nearly as much about cooling tensions between the STC and Hadi as it is about getting Riyadh and Abu Dhabi back on the same page.

Fighting between pro-STC military forces and pro-Hadi forces—including military units loyal to notorious strongman Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar—is still being reported in Shabwa but most other areas have calmed ([Alayyam](#), October 22). Delegations from both sides, however, have been meeting in Jeddah and are moving closer to finalizing a deal to freeze the conflict by determining an agreeable means for securing and governing Southern Yemen, at least for the duration of the broader war against the Houthis.

Portions of the draft agreement have been leaked to the public and indicate that the STC must agree to cede the matter of secession for the duration of the war with the Houthis, transfer UAE-backed southern forces to Hadi government control, and appoint Saudi forces to oversee the temporary capital of Aden. Additionally, the draft indicates that Hadi will remain as president but will share government positions equally among Northern and Southern political figures, a concession that has been attempted in the past but rarely successfully implemented. Also up for discussion, is the matter of the STC being well-represented in any government negotiating team that works toward a settlement with the Houthis ([Twitter.com/Dr\\_E\\_Kendall](https://twitter.com/Dr_E_Kendall), October 18).

The Jeddah Agreement serves as an important reminder that the only way to end the conflict is to begin addressing the fractured political scene across Yemen, regardless of which groups are viewed as the main belligerents. Similarly, it provides Hadi and the Saudi coalition a sort of practice round for any future negotiations with the Houthis, as the Houthis and the STC share similar historical grievances in terms of their political and economic marginalization.

The signing of the Jeddah Agreement will at the least freeze the conflict, and it creates a potential stepping stone toward more comprehensive achievements, but there is still much hanging in the balance. The success of the Jeddah Agreement will hinge on the government positions STC leaders are appointed to and the leeway they are given in local administration, among myriad other factors. At the same time, the agreement is likely to set the STC up to demand greater concessions in the future by formalizing it within the government. Similarly, the agreement will see the STC become increasingly legitimized while other Southern groups will remain outside of the political milieu. Transferring the command of STC forces to the government is a positive short-term fix, but doing so will not erase their allegiances, animosity toward the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islah party, or goals for an independent Southern Yemen, and neither will it ensure that they act in the interest of the government for the duration of the agreement.

*Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.*

## Death of AQIS Emir Asim Umar has Serious Implications for Al-Qaeda

*Farhan Zahid*

### Introduction

Following the death of Hamza bin Laden, al-Qaeda has lost another key leader in late September after U.S. and Afghan security forces killed al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) emir Asim Umar in Musa Qila district of Helmand province. Six other senior members of AQIS were also killed in the operation ([NDTV](https://www.ndtv.com), October 9).

Asim Umar, a veteran jihadist of Indian descent, was operating from Afghanistan, where AQIS also takes part in the Taliban-led insurgency against the Afghan government and U.S. troops. AQIS militants have been found embedded with Afghan Taliban forces in numerous terrorist operations in recent months.

Al-Qaeda Central established AQIS to serve two main purposes—launch terrorist attacks directly under the banner of Al-Qaeda Central and to compete with the newly established Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K). After a spectacular start with the attempted hijacking of a Pakistani Naval Frigate in 2014, AQIS has since failed to compete with IS-K, as the group has shown a higher degree of ferocity in its attacks across Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Umar's death is a colossal loss for al-Qaeda because he was one of the few experienced commanders the group had operating in the Pakistan-Afghanistan region, as most of the high-level leaders have either been killed in drone strikes (in tribal areas of Pakistan) or arrested after the commencement of Global War on Terror.

### Who was Asim Umar?

Umar, whose real name is Sana ul Haq, had been a prominent figure among Pakistani jihadist circles since the Afghan War (1979-89). Despite living in Pakistan and Afghanistan since the times of the Afghan War, Umar did not belong to either country. In fact, he was an Indian national who migrated to Pakistan to participate in Afghan jihad in the mid-1980s. He hailed from the Sambhal district of Uttar Pradesh ([Economic Times](https://www.economic-times.com), October 10). Zawahiri appointed Asim Umar as the emir of

AQIS in September 2014 in an attempt to reinvigorate al-Qaeda's terrorist activities in Pakistan. Zawahiri and Umar were featured together in the AQIS launch video. Previously, Umar had served as a high-ranking leader of Harkat ul Jihad-e-Islami and later Harkat ul Mujahideen (See [TM](#), October 24, 2014).

Umar was acknowledged as a skilled propagandist and released countless video statements and press releases for al-Qaeda and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) over the years. Umar also wrote a number of books on Dajjal (Anti-Christ). His books such as *World War-III and Dajjal*, *Bermuda Triangle and Dajjal*, *Lashkar of Dajjal: The Black Water in Pakistan*, and *Friends and Foes of the Messiah* are widely available on jihadist websites. Umar's long association with al-Qaeda is evident from the fact that he served as head of the group's Sharia committee in Pakistan before being elevated to emir of AQIS.

Under Umar's leadership, AQIS started its terrorist campaign in Pakistan by assassinating Brigadier General Zahoor Fazal Qadri in September 2014. The attack was followed by an attempted hijacking of Pakistani Navy Frigate PNS *Zulfiqar* (See [TM](#), October 24, 2014). If successfully concluded, the PNS *Zulfiqar* operation could have been the largest terror attack on a naval vessel since the USS Cole bombing in Yemen in 2000. In later years, AQIS focused more on operations in Afghanistan against U.S. and Afghan forces, likely because of the close links between Umar and Afghan Taliban leadership. A number of AQIS cells did, however, continue operating in Karachi, Pakistan. Another organization, Jamaat al Ansar al-Sharia, pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda. It is not clear whether Jamaat al-Ansar al-Shariah, which perpetrated number of terrorist attacks in Karachi in 2016-17, had any formal links with AQIS.

Umar studied in Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province at Darul Uloom Haqania madrasah, a religious seminary known for its role in Afghan jihad and later for supporting the Afghan Taliban. A significant percentage of the Afghan Taliban leadership attended Darul Uloom Haqania, including Mullah Omar, the now-deceased supreme commander of the Afghan Taliban.

### Implications

Though the Taliban or al-Qaeda has not given an official confirmation of their own, the Afghan government has released pictures and confirmed his death alongside six other AQIS operatives in a joint U.S.-Afghan operation ([Al Jazeera](#), October 8).

Umar was killed in an Afghan Taliban hideout in Musa Qila district, a known Taliban stronghold in Helmand province. The circumstances are indicative of long-running Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda ties and their collaboration in the Afghan insurgency. The idea that the Taliban would deny a safe haven to foreign fighters in Afghanistan after reaching a peace deal with the United States, as was suggested during negotiations, has been proven unlikely following Umar's discovery in Taliban-held territory. Additionally, Umar's presence in southern Afghanistan indicates strong al-Qaeda penetration into Afghanistan. Umar's death is a significant loss for al-Qaeda, which has still not fully recovered from the deaths of its veteran leaders, including Hamza bin Laden, who was once believed to be the future of al-Qaeda. The implications of Umar's death are far-reaching for the group's activities in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. Though he could not manage to take AQIS to the strategic level of IS-K, he still made an operational difference. AQIS under Umar's leadership claimed responsibility for the death of secular bloggers in Bangladesh, and the group established cells in the Afghan provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul, Paktika, Ghazni, and Nuristan. In 2015, U.S. forces also found a large AQIS training camp in Shorabak, Kandahar province ([NDTV](#), October 9). It appears that there might be a serious leadership crisis looming for al-Qaeda as there are few senior leaders available to fill the current gaps in leadership. Given the current leadership circumstances, there is a vital chance of a plunge in al-Qaeda terrorist activities in in the Af-Pak region.

### Conclusion

The killing of Asim Umar is a notable achievement for Afghan and U.S. security forces operating against the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda in the nearly two-decade-long Global War on Terror's South Asia theater. Currently, there are concerted efforts to negotiate peace in Afghanistan bolstered by the Trump administration's strong desire to exit the country at all costs. A peace negotiation with the Taliban and a quick exit for U.S. troops is worrisome in light of this incident, as it is indicative of the Taliban and al-Qaeda's continued cooperation. This showcases the groups' close alliance and the Taliban's resolve not to abandon al-Qaeda, despite their claims in the recently collapsed peace talks.

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