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Personalities Behind the Insurgency

BRIEF

Ibrahim Ahmed Mahmoud al-Qosi: From Guantanamo Bay Detainee to AQAP Leader

BRIAN M. PERKINS

Ashraf al-Mayar—The Face of Libyan Salafist Support for Haftar

RAFID JABOORI

CAPTURED: Chechen Islamic State Commander al-Bara al-Shishani Arrested in Ukraine

ALEKSANDRE KVAKHADZE

A Profile of Amadou Kouffa—One of the Most Prominent Jihadist Commanders in West Africa

JACOB ZENN

FARHAN ZAHID

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Death of AQIS-linked Commander Abdul Jabbar: Another Blow to al-Qaeda in Pakistan

Farhan Zahid

Recent comments in jihadist publications in Pakistan and Afghanistan suggest there is animosity among jihadist groups over the death of Qari Abdul Jabbar in July. His body was found in the Rakkan area of the Barakhan district of Pakistan’s Baluchistan. Qari Jabbar was prominent in the Pakistani jihadist landscape since his break from Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) in 2002 and the subsequent founding of his own Islamist terrorist group, Jamaat ul Furqaan (JUF), and for perpetrating a number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan. The exact nature of his death is unknown, but jihadist groups have claimed that he was killed in the custody of Pakistani security forces. However, that has not been verified. Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), the local chapter of the terrorist group, issued a statement on August 1 condemning the killing of commander Qari

Jabbar and blaming it on Pakistani security forces ([Jihadology](#), August 4).

Who was Jabbar?

Abdul Jabbar, son of Ghulam Mohmmad, was born in Sahiwal district of Pakistan’s Punjab province in 1972. Jabbar received his early education from a local madrasah in the Sahiwal district and later joined several different jihadist organizations. Abdul Jabbar began his jihadist career with Harkat ul Mujahdeen (HuM), an Islamist terrorist group involved in the insurgency in Indian Kashmir during 1990s. [1] Later, in 2000, he joined JeM, led by Masood Azhar, and became his right-hand man. The JeM is a splinter group of HuM, and Masood was HuM’s secretary general. In a video uploaded to YouTube in July, the jihadist media group All Star Info eulogized Jabbar for his efforts to promote jihad in Afghanistan and Pakistan alongside the Afghan Taliban. Jabbar remained close to other jihadist organizations, with his funeral being led by Fazal ur Rehman Khalil, the emir of HuM, who was a close

confidant of Osama bin Laden. [2] Maulana Abdul Aziz, the notorious Islamist radical leader of the Red Mosque in Islamabad, also issued a statement describing Jabbar's death as a loss ([YouTube](#), July 3).

Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, Jabbar parted ways with Masood after policy differences arose over Pakistan's assistance to U.S. efforts and the country's abandonment of the Afghan Taliban. He established his own organization, JUF, in 2002 along with Abdul Shah Mazhar, another JeM commander. Both JeM and JUF were banned by the Pakistani ministry of interior in 2002 after the December 13 Indian Parliament attack that escalated tensions between the two countries. Jabbar was later arrested after investigations revealed that JUF terrorists were involved in the 2003 assassination attempt of then-Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf ([U.S. National Counterterrorism Center](#), September, 2013). Jabbar was released in 2004 and went into hiding. Later he surfaced and joined the Maulana Sami ul Haq-led Pakistan Defense Council, an alliance of pro-jihadist political parties involved in staging demonstrations and protests against the country's alliance with the United States.

Later Years

JeM, similar to its predecessor organizations, splintered into several militant groups, mostly named after former high-ranking JeM operatives. These included the Abdul Jabbar group, the Gul Hassan group and the Asmatullah Mauviya group. These three main commanders of JeM, along with Abdul Shah Mazhar, had rebelled against Masood Azhar's acquiescence to state policy. Mauviya later reconciled, while Jabbar

only partly reconciled and did not agree to the demands of the JeM high command. After his first arrest following the assassination attempt on Musharaff and his subsequent release, Jabbar remained in contact with the leaders of the Afghan Taliban, Lashkar-r-Jhangvi and Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP). Another serious issue concerned his close relationship with al-Qaeda central and AQIS. Jabbar remained defiant on issues related to operations and terrorist attacks in Pakistan. Sources believed he was in close contact with AQIS and played some tacit role in the group's terrorist activities in Pakistan. However, his alleged links with Islamic State-Khorasan were never confirmed. [3] He was a frequent visitor to Pakistan's tribal areas and remained in contact with foreign jihadists - another issue that placed him at odds with Pakistani law enforcement and security forces. He also founded the group Tehreek-e-Ghalba-e-Islam.

Conclusion

Jabbar was a shadowy character on the jihadist landscape of Pakistan. For years, his footprints were found in major terrorist attacks in Pakistan, but his involvement could not be proven. He was considered suspicious because of his links with a variety of terrorist organizations, ranging from Islamist Kashmiris to the sectarian Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, to al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. He was one of those first jihadist commanders to turn against the Pakistani state, but he later reconciled several times before finally being killed. For a number of years, he managed to portray the image of a jihadist who had reconciled with the Pakistani authorities and could convince TTP and other hostile groups to do the same. However, this was never the case.

The condolence message that AQIS issued upon his death showcased his close relationship with al-Qaeda. Jihadist circles have mourned his death, indicating that there could be a future backlash. For this reason, Pakistan will need to maintain a higher level of security.

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Notes

[1] Discussions with a senior Islamabad-based journalist on December 15.

[2] Fazal ur Rehman Khalil was also the co-signatory of the Fatwa against Jews and Crusaders in Afghanistan by Bin Laden in 1998.

[3] Discussions with Islamabad-based senior security analyst Mohammad Amir Rana, director of the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, on December 20.

Ibrahim Ahmed Mahmoud al-Qosi: From Guantanamo Bay Detainee to AQAP Leader

Brian M. Perkins

The U.S. State Department offered a \$4 million reward for Ibrahim Ahmed Mahmoud al-Qosi (a.k.a. Abu Khubaib al-Sudani) through its Rewards for Justice program in November, bringing the longtime al-Qaeda figure back into the international spotlight. The reward comes over seven years after al-Qosi was released from Guantanamo Bay and repatriated to Sudan before subsequently traveling to Yemen and becoming a key figure for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Al-Qosi is a Sudanese citizen born in Atbara in 1960 and raised in a religious middle-class family. Little else is known about al-Qosi's adolescence and path to al-Qaeda. He began his tenure with the terrorist group in 1989, providing logistical support to al-Qaeda cell members in Sudan before fighting briefly in Afghanistan and becoming the deputy chief financial officer in Peshawar in 1991. Between 1991 and 1995, al-Qosi organized the receipt of donations from non-governmental and charitable organizations and weapons in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan. He also put in a brief stint fighting against the Russians in Chechnya. Osama bin Laden's expulsion from Sudan in 1996 ultimately led al-Qosi back to Afghanistan, where bin Laden had taken up residence. Al-Qosi first traveled to Pakistan in 1996 and was directed to Peshawar before traveling to Jalalabad and onward to bin Laden's hideout in Tora Bora. Al-Qosi primarily stayed with bin Laden as he moved about Afghanistan, acting as

a cook, messenger, bodyguard and driver, but also was sent to the frontlines in Kabul as part of a defensive mortar crew under the leadership of Abd al-Salam. [1]

As Kabul was falling in 2001, al-Qosi and dozens of other men who had escaped to Tora Bora fled to the Pakistani border, where they paid local tribes to cross into Pakistan and were ultimately turned over to Pakistani authorities in December 2001. Pakistan transferred al-Qosi and several others to U.S. custody at Guantanamo Bay. In 2010, al-Qosi pleaded guilty to conspiring with and providing material support to al-Qaeda in a pre-trial deal that would ultimately see him released back to Sudan in 2012. [2]

In December 2015, al-Qosi appeared in a video released by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, marking the first public indication that he had traveled to Yemen and become a key AQAP leader and one of the few non-Yemenis in positions of authority. In the video, the veteran al-Qaeda member encouraged jihad against the West and lauded the actions of the Charlie Hebdo attackers. With the loss of key ideologues and leaders such as Nasir al-Wuhayshi, Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan among others, it is likely that al-Qaeda sought out the high-profile veteran member to serve as both a key leader and the group's new public-facing ideologue. Al-Qosi brings a wealth of jihadist experience that AQAP lost with the death of several senior leaders. He trained at al-Farouk Camp, fought on the frontlines, served as deputy finance minister, and acted as Osama bin Laden's bodyguard and confidant, giving him a well-rounded skillset to pass off to more junior AQAP members. His operational role is not entirely clear, but, given his background, he likely serves

as a top-level coordinator in terms of recruitment, funding and strategy.

Al-Qosi has since appeared in at least a dozen videos released by AQAP, with a notable focus on maintaining jihad against the West, the group's relationship with its Somali affiliate al-Shabaab, and operational security. The latest video, featuring al-Qosi praising al-Shabaab, was released in October and was closely coordinated with the release of a similar message from core al-Qaeda that emphasized the enduring relationship (Jihadology.net, October 16). Al-Qosi also featured prominently in the group's video series titled "Demolishing of the Espionage" (Jihadology.net, October 20). In the series, al-Qosi and other veteran leaders highlight alleged Saudi and Islamic State spies that infiltrated AQAP's ranks as well as methods to counter espionage and securely communicate with one another, which has been a notable problem leading to the death of several prominent AQAP figures. The coordination of video releases and al-Qosi's messaging in general has fueled speculation that al-Qosi could also be filling a position within core al-Qaeda, which would not be surprising as former AQAP leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi—who certainly crossed paths with al-Qosi as Osama bin Laden's secretary—served concurrently as core al-Qaeda's second-in-command.

Despite being featured less prominently in international headlines due to a lack of widespread operations, AQAP remains a potent force in Yemen. The frequency of the group's messaging and al-Qosi's increased prominence in the past few years could mean that the group's leadership has begun to somewhat stabilize after several years of turmoil and may still be poised

for notable gains if given the opportunity. On December 9, AQAP released a 27-minute video that featured al-Qosi and highlighted attacks in the Yemeni governorate Abyan against forces aligned with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) (Jihadology.net, December 9). AQAP's attacks have primarily focused on the local Islamic State branch. However, both al-Qosi and AQAP in general have released countless statements condemning the UAE, its STC allies, and attempts to create an independent South. AQAP's clearest path to making notable gains would be through the return of conflict between the Hadi government and STC forces. Al-Qosi is likely to feature prominently in both the direction of forces and the messaging surrounding AQAP's operations to capitalize on the disorder in Southern Yemen.

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Notes

[1] Unclassified report from Office of Military Commissions. [http://www.mc.mil/Portals/0/pdfs/alQosi/Al%20Qosi%20\(AE060-A\).pdf?ver=2011-11-21-121446-000](http://www.mc.mil/Portals/0/pdfs/alQosi/Al%20Qosi%20(AE060-A).pdf?ver=2011-11-21-121446-000)

[2] Unclassified report from Office of Military Commissions. [https://www.mc.mil/Portals/0/pdfs/alQosi/Al%20Qosi%20\(PE1\).pdf](https://www.mc.mil/Portals/0/pdfs/alQosi/Al%20Qosi%20(PE1).pdf)

Ashraf al-Mayar—The Face of Libyan Salafist Support for Haftar

Rafid Jaboori

Ashraf al-Mayar is one of the most prominent militia field commanders fighting on the side of General Khalifa Haftar in the Libyan conflict. Mayar, a Salafist from eastern Libya, was a member of the 17 February Brigade, which was a coalition of militias that coexisted and sometimes correlated with the al-Qaeda-linked Ansar al-Sharia group. Mayar joined Haftar in 2014 when the latter launched Operation Dignity, claiming his goal was to save Libya from terrorist groups ([Afrigate News](#), July 24, 2014).

With the crucial field support of Salafist figures like Mayar, and the backing of regional powers like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and to some extent Russia, Haftar has since ran over most of eastern Libya and is now leading a military campaign aiming to capture the capitol Tripoli in the west and remove the UN-backed government ([Al-Jazeera](#), December 9).

Salafists in the East

One of the underreported aspects of the conflict in Libya is the role of Salafists, and in particular a certain strand of the traditional Islamist movement, called the Madkhalites. Madkhalism has adherents in several Muslim countries. It was named after its founder and the Saudi-based cleric Sheikh Rabee al-Madkhali, who for decades preached a form of Salafism that is against the Muslim Brotherhood and other

politically active Islamist movements. Ashraf al-Mayar is one of the most prominent figures of the Madkhalite group in Libya. Although Haftar is launching a war on jihadist and non-jihadist Islamist groups, some of the most important components of his own forces are Madkhalite Salafists. Madkhalism demands obedience to the dominant ruler of a country (following the traditional concept of *Wali al-Amr*) in any certain time and place as a paramount duty for its adherents over any other consideration. Mayar and many fellow Madkhalites declared their support for Haftar and considered the political leadership in eastern Libya to be the dominant state authority ([Djelfa](#), November 25, 2014).

Since 2014, Mayar has rejected the authority of the Tripoli-based governments, accusing them of being dominated by his enemies, the Muslim Brotherhood. More than ideology explains the Madkhalites loyalty to Haftar, however. Their strong ties to Saudi Arabia, and to some extent the UAE, seems to dictate where their allegiance in regional conflicts lie. In their confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood in countries across the Middle East and North Africa, Saudi Arabia has directed Salafists in those countries to confront the Muslim Brotherhood, even when they were members of elected governments ([Atvsat](#), July 14, 2016).

Changing Sides

Ashraf Abdullah al-Mayar is from the Hasi tribe in eastern Libya. His date of birth is not known, but he is believed to be in his mid-thirties. His decision to join Haftar's forces in 2014 was important to the success of Haftar's war efforts.

Mayar brought three crucial elements that played a key role in Haftar's advances in Benghazi, Libya's second largest city, and beyond: those where his inside knowledge of anti-Haftar Islamist groups, his fighting experience and network of fighters, and the religious rhetoric that he employed to support Haftar and his operations.

Mayar claims that he had infiltrated anti-Haftar Islamist forces with elements who stayed within the ranks of the militias, but were loyal to him. They became sources of valuable intelligence. He was proud of his knowledge of the addresses and backgrounds of fighters from those militias ([Youtube](#), September 23, 2014). [1]

When Benghazi fell to Haftar in 2015, Mayar's men were accused of committing human rights violations. The accusations against Haftar's forces continued in the following years ([Al-Araby](#), September 17, 2018).

The impact of Mayar's military field experience was apparent as soon as he switched sides. While he led al-Agha battalion in the 17 February Brigade, he swiftly formed and led al-Tawheed Battalion, which became one of the most prominent parts of Haftar's forces. Mayar was also awarded the rank of a major in Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). Mayar has proven his authority and his control over his group in and around Benghazi. He is trusted to protect key Saudi clerics when they visit Libya ([Minbarlibya](#), May 14).

Mayar is not a senior cleric and he is not known for having religious authority. However, he

became known as Haftar's mufti when he joined forces with the general. This was not only due to the power of Mayar's armed group and the way it operated under his command, but because of his prolific statements and interviews. In his interviews, Mayar emphasizes his condemnation of the Muslim Brotherhood and labels Salafi-jihadists as 'Khawarij' ([Karam Press](#), September 24, 2014).

The Khawarij were a group of Muslims who emerged in the early decades of Islam in the seventh century. Khawarij were well known for their piousness, rejection of authority, and violence against governments and people who did not agree with their interpretation of Islam. As they rebelled against Muslim rulers of their times, they were beaten in battlefields and dissolved, but the term has remained in use to describe ultra-radical groups. Mayar is well known for his excessive use of this term in labelling his enemies.

Under the accusation of being Khawarij, rivals of Haftar were rounded up and executed by Madkhalites on several occasions. One of these well-known incidents involved Mahmoud al-Warfali—another Haftar aide and a Madkhalite—executing prisoners in cold blood. Al-Warfali was indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court in 2017 and was sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department in December ([Al-Quds](#), December 17). Mayar himself is accused of committing human rights violations in Benghazi and neighboring areas. His name has even become synonymous to these brutal actions ([Afrigate News](#), August 1, 2016).

World of Conspiracies

Mayar condemns other Islamist groups for killing Jews, Christians and foreigners. He considers them to be under Islamic protection, either according to their status as non-Muslims living peacefully and obediently under Muslim rule or as non-combatant foreigners. However, a closer look into his thinking shows a man who believes wholeheartedly in conspiracy theories. He believes international politics to be directed by Freemason societies, who are controlled by Jewish people. [2]

Conclusion

Whether Haftar prevails in capturing Tripoli and controlling the whole of Libya or not, the role of Mayar and his co-Madkhalites will always be important. Despite criticism, Mayar's role in the operation to control Benghazi has been effective. The city has since become the base of power for Haftar. In order not to be viewed as too anti-Islamist, Haftar needs the Islamist credentials of Mayar and other Madkhalites.

The power of Madkhalites does not lie in eastern Libya alone. Many militias and figures in the West have some relations with Madkhalites, or they are actual adherents of the ideology but have not been so responsive to its directions to follow Haftar. That is prone to change, depending on the outcome of the battle for Tripoli, which is still not settled at the time of writing.

But Madkhalites' loyalty for Haftar is not unconditional. In 2018, Mayar seemed to have

become closer to Haftar's ally and possible rival Aquila Saleh—the president of the Libyan House of Representatives government based in Tobruk, which backs the LNA—when he reportedly had severe disagreements with the general (*Al-Araby*, October 30, 2018).

Saleh is a civilian, but is considered to be Madkhalite himself. The disagreement did not grow into a more serious division, but it was a reminder to Haftar of the autonomy held by Mayar and the Madkhalites.

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Notes

[1] See TV interview with Mayar published on Youtube on September 23, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IK8QPHKXkQ>

[2] See for example this video published on Facebook on January 22, 2016, and on Youtube <https://ar-ar.facebook.com/1479123322362459/videos/1949289158679204/>. See also an interview mentioned above with Mayar, published on Youtube on September 23, 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IK8QPHKXkQ>

CAPTURED: Chechen Islamic State Commander al-Bara al-Shishani Arrested in Ukraine

Aleksandre Kvakhadze

On November 12, the Ukrainian Security Services (SBU) apprehended al-Bara al-Shishani, a leader of the Russian-speaking faction of Islamic State (IS). Al-Bara was arrested in a private house located in the region surrounding Kyiv. According to SBU officials, al-Bara had been residing in Ukraine since 2018, and was using a fake ID ([YouTube](#), November 15). Reportedly, American and Georgian security services assisted their Ukrainian counterparts during the operation ([Liga.net](#), November 15). Al-Bara remains in custody and will most likely be deported to Georgia, where the Tbilisi City Court had already sentenced him to detention in absentia ([State Security Service](#), November 15). Al-Bara's arrest is the first case of a high-ranking Russian-speaking IS leader being detained.

Early years and Insurgency

The biographical details of al-Bara's life available in open sources are scarce and sporadic. Al-Bara, a.k.a. Umar, was born as Caesar Tokhosashvili and is ethnic Kist (Georgian Chechen) from the Pankisi Gorge, a place of origin for numerous jihadist leaders, including Umar al-Shishani, Muslim al-Shishani and Seyfullah al-Shishani. He was born in the Omalo village of the Akhmeta municipality of Georgia sometime in the early 1980s ([Hromadske](#), November 19). According to reports from Pankisi, during the second Chechen

war, 15-year-old al-Bara joined the Chechen insurgency and participated in reconnaissance operations close to the Chechen-Dagestani border. A former fighter claiming to have known al-Bara says that “he [al-Bara] was not religious, but he was passionate about weapons” ([Hromadske](#), November 19). Al-Bara joined the Syrian conflict in 2012 ([YouTube](#), November 15). Despite his mother’s alleged resistance to his decision, al-Bara left Georgia and traveled to Syria via Turkey ([Kviris Palitra](#), September 11, 2017). Upon his arrival in Syria, al-Bara assembled an armed group called Ahadun Ahad (‘One and Only’), mainly composed of ethnic Chechens. The group operated mainly in the Latakia province alongside Jund al-Sham, led by Muslim al-Shishani. Al-Bara’s group even took part in the 2015 Idlib offensive. Georgian media also reported on al-Bara’s illegal oil smuggling activities ([Kviris Palitra](#), September 11, 2017).

The situation changed dramatically when a personal conflict emerged between al-Bara and Muslim al-Shishani, leading to the end of their partnership. Soon after, sometime in early 2015, al-Bara was severely wounded in the arm and spent some time being treated in Turkey. Upon his return to Syria, al-Bara lacked the resources to continue supplying his autonomous jihadist group, ultimately deciding to dissolve the organization and join Islamic State ([Hromadske](#), November 19). He was reportedly a close associate of Umar al-Shishani and the counter-intelligence service of IS, known as the Amniyat ([Novaya Gazeta](#), November 22). Despite his allegiance to IS, some Georgian sources suggested that al-Bara was pragmatic and not

indoctrinated by their ideology. For instance, al-Bara reportedly punished Tamaz Chaghalidze (a.k.a. Ahmad al-Jurji), a leader of the Adjara (Muslim Georgian) faction of IS for releasing a communique that threatened the Georgian state and Georgian civilians ([Kviris Palitra](#) September 11, 2017).

After the collapse of IS, al-Bara’s whereabouts were unknown. In August 2017, Georgian media reported he was killed, along with his wife and four children, when airstrikes hit their position. This was disproved by al-Bara’s mother after she received a message from her son on WhatsApp ([Radio Way](#), September 2, 2017). Al-Bara attempted to return to Georgia, but refrained from doing so due to the strict legislation against returning foreign fighters ([Kviris Palitra](#), September 11, 2017). Eventually, al-Bara moved to Turkey, and then to Ukraine ([Novaya Gazeta](#), November 22).

Al-Bara in Ukraine

Little is known about al-Bara’s activities in Ukraine. Kyiv officials suggest that al-Bara was coordinating the Amniyat activities ([zn.ua](#), November 15). Al-Bara was not the only example of a former jihadist militant who settled in Ukraine. In 2017, the Ukrainian news agency Hromadske reported on the case of former Dagestani IS foreign fighters settling in Ukraine ([Hromadske](#), May 3, 2017). The notorious jihadist Akhmed Chataev was living in the Uzhgorod region of Ukraine prior to his extradition to Georgia. He potentially oversaw an existing jihadist network in Ukraine ([Zakarpattya](#), January 15, 2010).

Several factors make Ukraine an attractive destination for Russian-speaking jihadists. Russian is widely spoken in Ukraine. The absence of a language barrier enables easier travel throughout the country. Chechen jihadists can sometimes rely on anti-Russian solidarity when negotiating with Ukrainian authorities, as tens of Chechens have fought against Russian troops and their proxies in the Donetsk and Luhansk region ([Ukrainskaya Pravda](#), February 3, 2015). Additionally, neither Ukrainian society nor Ukrainian authorities possess an in-depth knowledge of the political violence and instability in the North Caucasus. Furthermore, unlike central regions of Russia, Islamophobia or Caucasophobia is not as widespread in Ukraine. And finally, existing corruption allow jihadists and other illicit actors to obtain a residence permit and other documents in Ukraine ([Segonya.ua](#), September 4, 2018). This combination of factors enables jihadist migrants to remain undetected for a period of time.

Another issue is the ease with which al-Bara was able to reside in Turkey, and from there travel to Ukraine. Owing to the geographic vicinity of the country, many Russian-speaking jihadists fled to Turkey following the collapse of the IS caliphate. Turkish media have frequently reported on the arrests of Russian-speaking members of IS ([Gazete Duvar](#), October 12, 2018). How al-Bara received his travel documents raises several questions. They could have been obtained either in Syria or in Turkey. Either case indicates severe security problems in Turkey, as al-Bara seemingly passed Turkish passport control with fraudulent documents.

Outlook

Al-Bara is the first detained high-ranking Russian-speaking IS commander, who possesses information on the finances and transnational networks of IS. Whether or not he has yet collaborated with the investigation is unknown. Ukrainian security services have previously detained members of jihadist terrorist organizations, but the details are usually not disclosed due to security considerations ([Novaya Gazeta](#), November 22).

This raises the question of why Ukrainian authorities decided to publicize the case. An extradition request from Georgian authorities is highly unlikely: as long as Tbilisi's relationship with the Pankisi Gorge remains problematic, Georgian authorities will not be enthusiastic to receive a high-ranking jihadist detainee from that region, even if he is a Georgian citizen. The case of IS returnee David Borchashvili—who was refused entry to Georgia several times during his deportation from Turkey—is an illustration of Tbilisi's refusal to accept returning IS fighters ([Radio Tavisupleba](#), November 23, 2015). The reason for al-Bara's arrest could be that attitudes towards North Caucasian and jihadist migrants in Ukraine are changing, as their presence in Ukraine could be used by Russian officials as a pretext to interfere in Ukraine's domestic affairs and label the country as a hotbed for terrorism.

Upon his extradition to Georgia, al-Bara will most likely be convicted for “joining terrorist organization abroad,” which, according to Article 328 of the Criminal Code of Georgia, calls for a prison sentence of 10 to 17 years ([Criminal Code of Georgia](#)). He will be the latest in a recent series of convicted Georgian militants, as authorities have recently arrested

alleged recruiter Ayub Borchashvili, members of the Adjarian (an ethnic group of Georgians) faction of IS and David Borchashvili ([Batumelebi](#), April 13, 2016). Nevertheless, he is unlikely to have an impact on the residents of Pankisi gorge from prison.

Conclusion

Although al-Bara was overshadowed by other Russian-speaking leaders of IS like Umar al-Shishani, Gulmurod Khalimov, Ahmed Chataev and Abu Jihad due to his limited appearances in jihadist propaganda videos, he was among the key IS operational militants. His involvement in the siege of Idlib and return to the theater after his injury suggests his commitment as a field commander. Most likely, he did not cut off communication with his fellow jihadists after he fled Syria, potentially offering intelligence agencies useful information on any terrorist network operating within Ukraine and the Caucasus. Nevertheless, al-Bara's jihadist career has likely been terminated by his arrest and detention for the next 10 years.

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A Profile of Amadou Kouffa— One of the Most Prominent Jihadist Commanders in West Africa

Jacob Zenn

Prior to 2012, Mali was considered a success story of democratic transition in West Africa. However, ever since the instability of Libya's civil war began affecting the entire region and Tuareg mercenaries returned to Mali from Libya and launched a rebellion, Mali has been facing constant crises. Ultimately, the Tuareg rebels were pushed aside by Tuareg jihadists in Mali who allied with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and took control of northern Mali from April 2012 until a French-led coalition ousted them in early 2013.

One militant whose life and career would forever be changed by the tumult in Mali was Amadou Kouffa. A Malian Fulani born sometime between 1950 and 1960 in the Niafouké region of central Mali to a "poor and pious family," Kouffa originally studied Islam among "reputable scholars" in Mauritania ([Maliactu](#), March 25). Although his teachers' names are not known publicly, Mauritania has historically been home to a number of prominent jihadist scholars. Therefore, Kouffa may have received early exposure to the Salafi-jihadist ideology in Mauritania.

In addition to his studies in Mauritania, Kouffa also became influenced by the Tablighi Jamaat ([Maliactu](#), March 25). Originally founded in British India, the Tablighi Jamaat maintains the objective of returning Muslims to a more

puritanical form of worship. Although it is not necessarily Salafist, it has been a bridge for a number of Muslims, including future jihadists, to embrace Salafism and then jihadism. One AQIM shura member, for example, attributes Tablighi Jamaat proselytization to contributing to laying the groundwork in the 1980s for the jihadism that emerged in West Africa from the 1990s onward ([al-Risalah #4](#), January 2017). In addition, the most prominent Malian Tuareg jihadist, Ansar al-Din leader Iyad ag Ghaly, has, like Kouffa, stated that he embraced Salafism after Tablighi Jamaat proselytization ([Al-Masra #45](#), April 3, 2017).

Kouffa's Return to Mali

By the 2000s, Kouffa was back in Mali and preaching as a *marabout* (itinerant religious scholar) based near Mopti, central Mali. Although Kouffa is an ethnic Fulani, he reportedly had followers from multiple ethnicities, including Tuaregs and Arabs ([Le Figaro](#), January 27, 2013). He began acquiring more of a public profile in 2010, when the draft Malian family law became a major national issue. It would have raised the legal marriage age for girls to 18 years old, provided women greater inheritance rights, and allowed secular authorities a greater role in marital affairs. As a result, leading Malian Muslim scholars, especially the Salafist scholar Mahmoud Dicko, came out against the law, which led to its postponement and eventual dilution, leading most human rights organizations to conclude that women's rights were "denied" ([fidh.org](#), September 12, 2011). This period is when Kouffa, who was described as a "fiery preacher," became a public figure because he vociferously

opposed that original draft of the family law ([tamoudre.org](#), January 11, 2013).

When the war in Mali erupted in 2012, Kouffa joined the AQIM offshoot based primarily in Gao and central Mali, called the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA). This group primarily focused on reviving historical Fulani-led caliphates in precolonial West Africa, whereas AQIM tended to focus on Andalusia (referencing the caliphate that existed during the Middle Ages in what is today Spain) or other narratives more familiar to Algerian Arabs. Although Kouffa would not have been among the most seasoned jihadists in MUJWA in terms of military experience, he apparently still played a leading role in one of MUJWA's "last stands" before the French-led military intervention codenamed Operation Serval in early 2013, which ousted MUJWA from the towns in northern Mali that it had controlled. The battle Kouffa led was in Konna, central Mali. Although MUJWA lost the battle, Kouffa established his jihadist bona fides there ([tamoudre.org](#), January 11, 2013).

Between 2013 and 2014, MUJWA, Ansar al-Din, and other AQIM-allied Mali-based jihadist group were mostly in retreat as a result of Operation Serval. However, in 2015 Kouffa reemerged as leader of a group known in the media as the "Macina Liberation Front," although in actuality the group seems never to have actually used those "secular" - and "nationalist"-sounding terms - like "Liberation" and "Front." Rather, it called itself "Katiba Macina," meaning "Macina Brigade," which refers to a pre-colonial Fulani-led Islamic state in Mali called "Macina." The first attack claimed

by Katiba Macina was on August 11, 2015 at Byblos Hotel in Sevare, central Mali, where Kouffa himself had preached years before (rfi.fr, August 11, 2015). That attack, which targeted international peacekeepers and Malian soldiers at the hotel, killed 13 people.

Katiba Macina demonstrated the attack on Byblos Hotel was not a one-time operation when, in September 2015, it attacked a military post around 100 miles away in Mopti, central Mali, killing one soldier. A local politician in the area attributed the attack to Kouffa and Katiba Macina (naharnet.com, September 13, 2015). Two months later, Katiba Macina again claimed an attack, this time a raid on the prestigious Radisson Blu hotel in Mali's capital of Bamako, killing over 20 people, including many foreigners. Also claiming that attack was al-Mourabitun, which was led officially by longtime Sahel-based jihadist Mokhtar Belmokhtar. Katiba Macina also acknowledged its involvement was "in conjunction with" Ansar al-Din (France24.com, November 23, 2015). These three main Malian jihadist groups were, therefore, clearly allied, while MUJWA itself no longer existed because it was succeeded by al-Murabitun.

Kouffa Out of the Shadows

By 2016, a Katiba Macina video made it clear that the group had come under Ansar al-Din and was a brigade within Ansar al-Din (intellivoire.com, May 18, 2016). Moreover, as a result of Katiba Macina's growing profile, Kouffa himself became an increasingly known—and notorious—figure in Mali and beyond. However, few outsiders knew what he looked like until March 2017, when a new group was formed called

Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), meaning "Group for Support of Islam and Muslims." JNIM, whose emir was Iyad ag Ghaly, united Ansar al-Din, Katiba Macina, al-Murabitun and AQIM's Sahara Brigade under its banner and received sanction from AQIM and al-Qaeda leadership. The video introducing the group also featured Iyad Ag Ghaly, Kouffa, and the respective leaders of the other brigades, revealing Kouffa's face to the public ([Terrorism Monitor](http://TerrorismMonitor.com), April 21, 2017).

Also in 2017, one of Kouffa's former students in Mali—a Burkinabe preacher named Ibrahim Dicko—was killed in Burkina Faso (YouTube.com, June 13, 2017). Dicko had founded the Burkina Faso-based jihadist group Ansaroul Islam, which was loyal to al-Qaeda, after he reportedly fought together with Kouffa in Mali (JeuneAfrique.com, January 9, 2017). Therefore, Kouffa was instrumental not only in consolidating the jihad in his native Mali, but also helping to expand it into neighboring Burkina Faso.

One year later, in November 2018, Kouffa also demonstrated a regional outlook when he called for a broader jihad in areas that were formerly parts of the pre-colonial, Fulani-led Islamic state in West Africa, including in Nigeria and Cameroon, in a JNIM video alongside Iyad ag Ghaly and the AQIM Sahara Brigade leader Jemal Oukacha (a.k.a. Yahya Abu Hammam). In that video, Kouffa also criticized Ansaroul Islam for recklessly exposing itself to counter-insurgency operations by the French and Burkinabe militaries and not remaining behind the bush (Maliactu.com, November 12, 2018). There were suspicions that after exposing himself in this video France was able to track Kouffa and

conduct an operation targeting him less than three weeks later near Mopti, Mali. The French government reported that Kouffa was killed in this operation (defense.gouv.fr, November 29, 2018). As is so common with reports of jihadist leaders' deaths, however, it turned out not to be true. Kouffa "reappeared" in a JNIM video in February 2019 alongside fellow fighters. He was, in fact, alive and accepted an "interview" from jihadist journalists in the video (Maliweb.net, February 28).

By this time, Kouffa was already an internationally wanted terrorist, especially as JNIM attacks continued escalating throughout Mali. The United States, therefore, designated Kouffa as a terrorist on November 7, 2019 (mr.embassy.gov, November 7). Nevertheless, Kouffa has proven elusive and is now among the most prominent jihadist commanders in West Africa. He is especially important because if he succeeds in his goal in expanding a Fulani-led jihad in the region, it means JNIM will be set to cross into new territories. This could include countries like Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon, if not also through Burkina Faso and onward to countries such as Ghana.

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