



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

BRIEF

ANDREW
MCGREGOR

**Abdullahi
Banati: The Al-
Shabaab
Commander
who Straddles
the Kenyan-
Somali Border**

SUNGUTA WEST

**Mukaram
Khan: Hizb ul
Ahrar - The
New Security
Challenge in
Pakistan**

FARHAN ZAHID

**Qais al-Khazali
—The PMU
Militia Leader
Challenging the
U.S. in Iraq**

RAFID JABOORI

**Filling the
Void: A Profile
of New Quds
Force
Commander
Esmail Ghaani**

ANDREW
DEVEREUX

VOLUME XI, ISSUE 1 | JANUARY 2020

Salah Gosh and the Survival of Sudan's Old Regime

Andrew McGregor

When former members of Sudan's much-feared National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) mutinied on January 14, there were fears loyalists to the once powerful ex-NISS director Salah Gosh were preparing to restore the old military/Islamist regime of Omar al-Bashir.

Gosh, a Sha'iqiya Arab, was born in the Nubian town of Nuri in 1957. As a student, Gosh became aligned with Sudan's Muslim Brotherhood, which, under its leader Dr. Hassan al-Turabi, partnered with Islamist officers led by Omar al-Bashir to take power in a 1989 coup. Siding with President Bashir, Gosh later played a major role in purging the regime of al-Turabi's supporters in 1999.

As part of the intelligence service, Gosh was deeply involved in organizing the violent Janjaweed assaults on civilians in Darfur after a rebellion broke out there in 2003. As pressure grew on Khartoum over its atrocities in Darfur in the 1990s-2000s, Gosh, appointed NISS

director in 2004, became the regime's point man with the CIA, offering an abundance of intelligence regarding al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden in exchange for the release of Sudanese citizens in Guantanamo and a degree of immunity for the regime's war crimes. Despite sanctions on the Sudanese leadership, Gosh traveled to Washington for secret meetings. As Gosh revealed in 2005: "We have a strong partnership with the CIA. The information we have provided has been very useful to the United States" (*LA Times*, April 29, 2005; *LA Times*, June 17, 2005).

An unsuccessful 2007 offensive on N'Djamena by Chadian rebels assisted by the NISS as part of a proxy war between Sudan and Chad was reported to have been planned by Salah Gosh and the Sudanese defense minister, Lt. General 'Abd al-Rahim Muhammad Hussein (*Al-Sudani* [Khartoum], February 7, 2007).

In February 2007, Gosh responded to an International Criminal Court (ICC) extradition order for President al-Bashir for war crimes by warning the regime would have no choice other than adopting "Islamist fanaticism" (*Al-Sahafah* [Khartoum], February 21, 2007).

In 2009, Gosh was sacked as intelligence director for a massive intelligence failure, namely failing to uncover the plans of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM - a Darfur rebel group) before their May 10, 2008 raid on the capital. Gosh then served as a presidential advisor for security affairs for three years, losing that position in a 2011 power struggle with NCP vice-chairman and presidential advisor Dr. Nafi 'Ali Nafi. Al-Bashir and Nafi are both members of the Ja'aliyin Arab tribe.

While serving as a presidential adviser, Gosh was dismissed and arrested on suspicion of plotting a coup against al-Bashir in November 2012. The investigation into Gosh began when Sudanese intelligence noticed he had recently moved 25 members of his extended family to the United States (*al-Akhbar* [Khartoum], November 24, 2012). Shortly after his arrest, Gosh was taken to hospital for successful heart bypass surgery (*al-Watan* [Khartoum], December 2, 2012).

After the coup attempt, several detainees claimed Brigadier-general Mohamed Ibrahim Abd al-Jalil (a.k.a. Wad Ibrahim) was the intended leader of a post-coup command council, not Salah Gosh. Authorities claimed to have obtained a confession from Gosh, but its contents were never revealed. An April 2013 general amnesty for NISS suspects in the coup attempt did not include Gosh, who continued to be questioned by authorities on corruption charges until his release without charge in July 2013 ([Sudan Tribune](#), May 1, 2013).

As anti-Bashir public disturbances grew, the Sudanese president brought the hard-liner back as NISS chief in February 2018. Gosh met the demonstrators with rubber bullets, beatings, live ammunition, arbitrary detention and torture ([Al-Jazeera](#), April 8, 2019). However, these measures did not prevent the overthrow of al-Bashir's regime by the Sudanese Army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on April 11, 2019.

Gosh resigned April 13, 2019 and was replaced by Lieutenant General Abu Bakr Mustafa. The former NISS director disappeared two days later but was believed to have fled to Egypt. A police attempt to search Gosh's home in May 2019 was repelled by NISS agents who threatened to kill police with a Dushka heavy machine gun ([Radio Dabanga](#), September 22, 2019). Gosh was sanctioned by the United States in August 2019 for "gross violations of human rights" ([The National](#) [Abu Dhabi], August 15, 2019).

An arrest warrant for Gosh was issued by Sudan's public prosecutor in September 2019 on charges of first-degree murder. In October 2019, a torture case against Gosh was opened in Khartoum ([Anadolu Agency](#), October 15, 2019).

In July 2019, the NISS changed its name to become the General Intelligence Service (GIS) as part of a general reorganization. NISS members were given the choice of retiring or joining either the army or the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary.

The January 14 revolt began in al-'Ubayd (North Kordofan), where ex-NISS members claimed arbitrary dismissals had a negative impact on separation benefits and pensions. The protests then spread to Khartoum and other cities across the country. Five people were killed before security forces restored order after hours of gunfire in the center of the capital.

Interim Sudanese leader Lieutenant General 'Abd al-Fatah al-Burhan blamed the rebellion on the Operations Authority division of the NISS, a militarized component of the agency created by Salah Gosh ([France24.com](#), January 16).

According to RSF commander Muhammad Hamdan Daglo "Hemeti," "The person behind this shooting today is Salah Gosh. He has many generals active within the security sector with an aim to create confusion and fighting" ([Reuters \[Khartoum\]](#), January 14). Gosh remains at large, most likely in Cairo.

Andrew McGregor is Director of Aberfoyle International Security, a Toronto-based agency specializing in security issues related to the Islamic world.

Abdullahi Banati: The Al-Shabaab Commander who Straddles the Kenyan–Somali Border

Sunguta West

Abdullahi Banati, an al-Shabaab commander, is known to straddle the Kenya-Somali border, killing civilians and security personnel.

A member of Amniyat, the intelligence wing of al-Shabaab, Banati has been deployed near Kenya's northeastern region with special instructions to strike and disrupt the work of security forces patrolling the border ([Strategic Intelligence](#), October 18, 2019).

The jihadist is a member of the Galjeel tribe, which inhabits central and southern Somalia. Under his command are small teams of militants, which have targeted civilians in Kenya.

The militant reportedly joined al-Shabaab in 2012. His first major assignment is believed to have been the failed al-Shabaab attack on a Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) camp in Buare, Lamu County, in 2015. Fighters from the militant group had attempted to overrun the camp at dawn but were repulsed by KDF soldiers. Eleven Islamists were killed in a gunfight, including the British-born jihadist Thomas Evans.

Banati was reportedly injured in the attack, retreating into Somalia, where he received care and treatment. In 2018, he resurfaced near the Kenyan border as an accomplished fighter and commander ([Standard Digital](#), October 19, 2019).

He has been leading units consisting of eight or 10 militants. The groups are well organized, with specific militants monitoring vehicle movements,

planting explosives and standing by to provide support ([Nairobi News](#), November 3, 2019).

These teams have been carrying out deadly cross-border incursions, especially in Garissa county, where teachers, quarry workers, passengers on buses, and other professionals such as doctors are increasingly being targeted.

In October, Banati reportedly led a group of militants in planting an improvised explosive device (IED) on the road between Liboi and Damajale, which struck a police vehicle on patrol, killing 10 security officers from the elite paramilitary General Service Unit (GSU). After the attack, Banati reportedly fled into southern Somalia ([Standard Digital](#), October 19, 2019).

Reports indicate that the militant leader had planned the attack with the help of a terrorist cell that operates from Dadaad Refugees Camp complex. The complex has been accused recently of hosting al-Shabaab cells that have planned and executed attacks in Kenya.

In 2015, militants from al-Shabaab attacked Garissa University College, killing at least 148 people, mainly Christian students. Ensuing investigations indicated that the attack had been planned from the refugee camp. Banati had hosted the fighters who attacked the college.

His name has also featured prominently in three major terrorist attacks in Kenya. News reports also indicate that he had played a key role in the Westgate attack in 2013, during which at least 70 people were killed and over 200 wounded. Again, the attackers had used the camp complex for planning. More recently, he was linked to the Dusit D2 office attack in Nairobi's Riverside Drive in January last year ([Strategic Intelligence](#), October 18, 2019).

On occasion, Kenya threatened to close the camp complex over its connections to terrorist activities. Government officials have accused the camp of being a breeding ground for terrorists,

some of whom work with Banati and other al-Shabaab operatives.

Although Banati has been on security agencies' radar for some time, he is known to be very elusive and thus far has evaded capture.

Sunguta West is an independent journalist based in Nairobi.

Mukaram Khan: Hizb ul-Ahrar - The New Security Challenge in Pakistan

Farhan Zahid

On November 14, 2019, 14 people were injured when a bomb exploded in Lahore. The attack was later claimed by Hizb ul-Ahrar (HuA), a relatively new terrorist group in Pakistan ([Dawn](#), November 30, 2019). The group was founded as a splinter group of Jamaat ul-Ahrar (JuA), which is itself a splinter group of Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP). The phenomenon of militant organizations breaking apart into smaller groups is not new, and in fact can rob the groups of operational momentum. However, the near-term problem for government security forces that result from the creation of a splinter faction typically comes from the new group attempting to demonstrate its capabilities through wide-scale attacks. The HuA is no exception: under its leader, Mukaram Khan, it has conducted a series of attacks in Pakistan.

Reasons for the Schism

TTP has never been a monolithic entity, as it is comprised of more than 40 factions with a central *shura* (council) providing limited cohesion. The TTP first splintered after the death of its emir, Hakeemullah Mehsud, in 2013, and the various factions clashed over the question of leadership. The major new terrorist organization that emerged out of the turmoil within TTP was Jamaat ul-Ahrar (JuA), led by Omar Khalid Khurasani in 2014. The JuA perpetrated several mass casualty terrorist attacks in Lahore, Quetta, Peshawar, the tribal areas and other parts of Pakistan. The group carried out scores of low-intensity strikes against security forces. The JuA spread to Karachi and Quetta from its base of operations in Pakistan's Mohmand tribal district. Reportedly, the emir of JuA is based in the neighboring province of Nangarhar,

Afghanistan. Like its mother organization the TTP, the JuA also expanded and produced its own splinter, the HuA, in November 2017.

The TTP alliance, which is still operating and perpetrating attacks every year, splintered after Omar Khalid Khurasani left the group and founded the JuA. Khurasani left the TTP after serious leadership disputes emerged as a result of the intense pressure placed on the group from the Pakistani military's Zarb-e-Azb and Rad-ul-Fasad operations in 2014. Reports emerged in November 2017 that a faction of the JuA broke off and formed HuA ([Nation](#), November 12, 2017).

In announcing the formation of his new organization, Mukaram Khan stated the reason he left JuA was because he considered the group's tactics to be un-Islamic. He pointed to large attacks claimed by JuA that resulted in mass civilian casualties. Specifically, Khan pointed to the bombing of Gulshan e-Iqbal Park in Lahore, which targeted Christians celebrating Easter on March 27, 2016. The attack killed 74 people and injured over 340 ([Dawn](#), January 7, 2017). Khan also pointed to a December 29, 2015 attack in Mardan that killed 26 people and injured 56 ([Tribune.com.pk](#), December 31, 2015). Khan viewed these attacks on innocent people, including women and children, to be against Islamic teachings, saying the JuA leadership did not prioritize avoiding civilian casualties. He claimed that this was a primary reason why he decided to part ways with JuA. Khan also accused Khurasani as being vengeful and involved in attempts to assassinate him. Overall, Khan said he established HuA to reform the current tactics of jihadist operations in Pakistan ([Pakistan Today](#), November 13, 2017).

Leadership and Terrorist Activities

Prior to the formation of HuA, Khan was close to Khurasani, having served as a commander, the head of JuA's intelligence wing, and a spokesperson for the organization. [1] Khan is a

seasoned jihadist who served as one of the most ruthless TTP, and later JuA, commanders since its formation. He hails from the Mohmand district of Pakistan's former tribal areas. Khurasani is also from Mohmand district, and it is known as a hub of JuA activities. The Pakistani military has conducted several operations in that district since 2008. According to various accounts, the leadership of both JuA and HuA are now based in the eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar and neighboring areas, which is a result of the Pakistani military pushing militants out of the tribal districts in 2014. In fact, Khan announced the formation of HuA from Nangarhar province in November 2017 ([DOPEL](#), 2019). Before breaking ranks with JuA, the relationship between Khurasani and Khan had reportedly soured to such a degree that a firefight took place between the supporters of the two, with Mukaram receiving injuries as a result. Mukaram later issued an audio statement describing his differences over the killing of innocent people by JuA in terrorist attacks. He said, "I and other members tried to convince the leadership to change such policies, but failed" ([Daily Times](#), November 12, 2017).

The JuA worked with Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), the organization's Afghan province, for a brief period of time in 2014-15, but this relationship did not last long, and it is not clear if Khan himself will pursue a relationship with the group ([Aurora Intel](#), 2019). Allegedly, Khan would like to remain in the orbit of TTP, but as more of a separate entity than his previous association with JuA would allow.

After the formation of HuA, sources estimated that some 40 percent of JuA's commanders and foot soldiers joined Khan's new organization ([Daily Times](#), November 12, 2017). Khan designated senior commanders to form the upper hierarchy of HuA. Most of this group are former JuA militant commanders, including Jihadyar Mehsud, commander of HuA's military wing; Muslimyar, head of finance; Haji Rashid,

head of the political *shura*; Imran Aurakzai, Mohmand Agency commander; and Qari Ismael Afridi, Khyber Agency commander. Khan also named Aziz Yousafzai as the organization's spokesman, issuing statements and press releases on behalf of the terrorist group ([Pakistan Today](#), November 13, 2017).

Since its formation, the HuA has attempted to compete with both TTP and JuA in perpetrating mass casualty attacks in Pakistan. The focus of HuA attacks is typically law enforcement and security forces, but at times the group has targeted civilians, despite its earlier vow to avoid doing so. HuA has hitherto claimed a number of terrorist attacks in Karachi, where it targeted and killed a police officer on October 3, 2019 ([Max Security](#)). An additional attack in the D.I. Khan district of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province killed four police officers in February 2019, and on May 8 of the same year, a terrorist attack that targeted police standing near a Sufi Shrine in Lahore killed 11 police officers and injured 25 people ([Dawn](#), February 13, 2019; [News International](#), May 12, 2019). This string of attacks is part of HuA's "Operation Shamzai," which it launched in February 2019. Earlier attacks fell under its "Operation Mohammad bin Qasim," which was launched in April 2018.

A JuA cell that had been operating in Lahore reportedly left the organization to join HuA. This cell is allegedly the same one that claimed to have carried out the aforementioned Easter 2016 terrorist attack, as well as an attack on the Wagah Border that killed 60 people watching the Pakistan-India daily flag ceremony. This cell reportedly joined HuA after the split. [2]

Conclusion

The rise of HuA under Mukaram Khan has shown that the terrorist group is increasing its operations and influence across Pakistan. Curbing the HuA's terrorist activities seems to be a large task for local law enforcement forces in Pakistan, as the terrorist organization has

managed to establish various operational cells in different districts. The police will need to widen the scope of investigations and inter-provincial coordination among law enforcement bodies and the intelligence community. Security policymakers in Pakistan also need to have a closer look at the HuA's rise and the spread of its activities across Pakistan. It is time to frame strategies to combat cell-structured terrorist organizations like HuA, which are highly secretive and decentralized.

Farhan Zahid has done his Ph.D. in Counter Terrorism (Topic: Al-Qaeda-linked Islamist violent Non-State Actors in Pakistan and their relationship with Islamist Parties) from Vrije University Brussels, Belgium. He writes on counter-terrorism, al-Qaeda, Pakistani al-Qaeda-linked groups, Islamist violent non-state actors in Pakistan, militant landscapes in Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban.

Notes

[1] Discussions with senior Islamabad based journalist, January 21, 2020

[2] Discussions with a senior police officer in Islamabad, January 21, 2020

Qais al-Khazali—The PMU Militia Leader Challenging the U.S. in Iraq

Rafid Jaboori

On December 6, the U.S. State Department announced sanctions on three Iraqi militia leaders, accusing them of killing peaceful protesters. The most prominent name among those was Sheikh Qais al-Khazali, the leader of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (The League of the Righteous—AAH) Shia militia ([U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), December 6).

The power of al-Khazali and his AAH has grown significantly in recent years. Al-Khazali enjoys steady and continuous support from Iran and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Al-Khazali is the military and political leader of AAH, which is one of the most powerful Shia militias in Iraq. It currently operates under the official umbrella organization, the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU). AAH fighters have been deployed across Iraq since the military operations against the extremist Sunni group Islamic State (IS) began. The group has since consolidated its positions since the end of major operations against IS. The political arm of AAH now has 15 seats in parliament and two cabinet positions in the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi.

When the Iranian General Qasem Soleimani and deputy leader of the PMU Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis were killed in a U.S. airstrike just outside the Baghdad International Airport on January 3, there were numerous calls for and

anticipation of Iranian retaliation. Eventually, Iran launched missile attacks on two military bases on January 8. No U.S. personnel were killed and Iran signaled that it would not seek further escalation. ([Al-Arabiya](#), January 8).

Al-Khazali pledged that the Iraqi retaliation, especially for the killing of al-Muhandis, was yet to come. ([Sky News Arabia](#), January 8).

Internal Splits Within the Insurgency

AAH was founded when al-Khazali split from the Mahdi Army, the militia that was formed and led by the influential Shia cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, to fight the U.S.-led coalition forces after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Al-Khazali was a member of the movement that Moqtada's father, Ayatollah Mohammed Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr founded in the 1990s. The movement depended on a network of young Shia clerics, of which al-Khazali was one of the most active (See [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), January 29, 2010).

After the U.S.-led invasion, Moqtada revived his father's movement and al-Khazali joined him. Al-Khazali was a field commander in the Mahdi army and spokesman for al-Sadr. After the failure of al-Sadr's second anti-coalition uprising in the summer of 2004, al-Sadr accepted a ceasefire and tended to avoid direct confrontation with the coalition forces in the following months and years. Al-Khazali and a group of al-Sadr's close aides did not approve the new policy, and with the support of Iran, they split and formed the AAH (See [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), January 29, 2010).

As soon as al-Khazali founded his own militia, the Shia insurgency in Iraq acquired new momentum and new, more effective tactics. The

name of the group was not clear in the beginning of their insurgency, therefore the U.S. military called them the "Special Groups" and defined them as insurgent groups that were operating outside the authority of al-Sadr with direct backing from Iran. Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq was also one of the early splinter Shia groups that were classified as a Special Group.

One of al-Khazali's senior aides explained that the use of improvised explosive devices that were made in Iran became a signature tactic of the Shia militias' operations against the U.S.-led coalition forces.

Another tactic that was brought in by al-Khazali and his men was the level of sophisticated training and capabilities they showed in attacks launched by commandos on sensitive targets. In one of the rare and most daring of their operations, al-Khazali sent his men to Karbala where they launched a surprise attack on U.S. forces that were inside the Karbala provincial compound. The attacking group overpowered the U.S. soldiers, kidnapping five of them who they later killed (See [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), January 29, 2010).

On March 2007 al-Khazali was arrested alongside his brother Laith, who was also sanctioned by the State Department in December 2019, for the attack on Karbala. With them was another man, Ali Musa Daqdoq, a Lebanese Hezbollah leader. Al-Khazali managed to keep control of his group even while he was imprisoned. Months after his arrest, his militia launched another commando attack against the Iraqi ministry of finance and kidnapped five British citizens, including the IT consultant Peter Moore and his four bodyguards. Al-Khazali eventually regained his freedom in a prisoner

swap deal in exchange for freeing Moore. However, all of the bodyguards were killed in custody before the deal was reached ([Alrai Media](#), January 6, 2010).

After the U.S. military withdrawal, al-Khazali was officially accepted within Iraqi politics, despite that fact that he did not give up his arms, and he did not dissolve his militia. Al-Khazali's inclusion in the political scene was part of the strategy of the then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who had become a staunch enemy of al-Sadr. Al-Maliki worked persistently to weaken al-Sadr's movement by supporting those who had split from his organization. Al-Maliki introduced the policy under the notion of national reconciliation, but the move was heavily criticized for two reasons. First, because Sunni armed groups were not given the same treatment and second, those Shia militias neither denounced violence nor did they dissolve their armed wings.

In later years, al-Maliki explained that he believed that Iraq should form a semi-official militia with the support of the state to guard Iraq and its Shia community ([Elaph](#), November 13, 2016).

From Syria to Islamic State

After he was released from prison and as U.S. troops withdrew from Iraq in 2011, circumstances became ideal for al-Khazali to further solidify his group's influence. When the Syrian revolution against the rule of the secular but Alawite Shia dominated regime of President Bashar al-Assad broke out, Iraqi Shias were worried about the possible Sunni nature of the rebels. As the revolution turned into a military conflict, Iran deployed Shia militias from Iraq,

and the AAH was one of the first to go. ([Middle-East-Online](#), March 23, 2014).

Years of operating freely with significant backing from the IRGC and the Maliki government meant that when Islamic State launched its blitzkrieg campaign and overran most of the Sunni populated provinces of Iraq in June 2014, al-Khazali and his AAH were ready to mobilize. AAH men were publicly deployed in and around Baghdad even before the famous fatwa that was issued by the senior Iraqi Shia cleric Ayatollah Sistani called for volunteers to carry arms to fight IS. When the fatwa was issued, the AAH was in a good position to absorb a widening pool of recruits ([Raialyoum](#), November 19, 2014).

In the following months and years, al-Khazali significantly expanded his activities. In the propaganda of the AAH, he is portrayed as a bold field commander who joins his men in the battlefield, wearing military fatigues and firing automatic rifles against the enemy. But AAH has been accused of killing civilians and committing human rights violations in the areas they operate in. One of these incidents took place in the town of Jurf al-Sakhar, which is south of Baghdad. The entire Sunni population of the town was displaced during AAH operations there during the early weeks of the war against IS, and they have still been unable to return to their homes. The militia was also accused of killing civilians in Jurf al-Sakhar and elsewhere ([Alittihad.ae](#), August 19, 2019).

Al-Khazali was filmed with his men in the burial site of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in Tikrit. The whole building that included Hussein's grave was demolished. The Shia militias decided to use the fog of the war against IS to settle all of their disputes against enemies

from the past and present ([Arab48](#), November 13, 2018).

The Politics of Resistance

Al-Khazali's military strategy emphasized a unique role for his group, to be done in full coordination with the other Shia militias of the PMU. He frequently appears in public side by side with Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of Badr, which is the only PMU militia that is larger than AAH, to show unity and solidarity ([Alghadeer](#), January 30, 2016).

The same strategy was adopted in politics. Al-Khazali's political arm (Sadiqoon) went into coalition with al-Fatah, which is led by Hadi al-Amiri and includes all the major PMU militias except al-Sadr's. Al-Fatah came second in elections after al-Sadr's party, with al-Khazali's Sadiqoon winning 15 seats. When the government of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi was formed, al-Khazali was able to appoint two cabinet members ([Nasnews](#), October 11, 2018).

Shia-led governments in Iraq have, since the 2003 invasion, justified including militia leaders in their governing coalitions by claiming that those militia groups had abandoned their arms. This notion has been emphasized further as the PMU was formed as an official organization operating under the command of the government. In fact, however, almost all those militias kept their weapons and maintained their independent decision-making processes and chains of command, despite taking official positions within the government and participating in political events, like elections. Al-Khazali, probably more than any other Shia leader, never shied away from stating that his

group, and other Shia groups, are actually "Resistance" groups that hold two key features—one that abides by Iraqi laws and restriction as political organizations, and another that is committed to the cause of Resistance. This includes fighting alongside the Assad regime in Syria and aspiring to play a role in the Arab-Muslim conflict with Israel ([Buratha News](#), December 28, 2019).

Gaining similar military capabilities as Lebanese Hezbollah was always an aspiration of the Iraqi Shia militias. No single Iraqi Shia militia has ever been able to fully emulate Lebanese Hezbollah's success, but the military capacities of al-Khazali's group have come closer than any other group. AAH has always maintained distinct capabilities, like being able to conduct commando operations against both military targets and civilian ones, in order to kidnap individuals. Yet with all of al-Khazali's progress in pursuing both Shia jihadist and political goals, he has failed to dominate the scene the way Lebanese Hezbollah does in Lebanon. Nevertheless he seems to have adapted to the Iraqi situation, which is different than Lebanon, where the militias are older and larger than AAH. In recent years, the media activities of the group have been effective. Al-Khazali owns al-Ahad TV station, which is more influential than the media arms of other militias. In comparison, the larger Moqtada al-Sadr movement never succeeded in launching its own TV network, although it tried a few times.

Al-Khazali has regularly maintained a presence on TV screens, giving interviews to Iraq and non-Iraqi media outlets, since his days as a spokesman for Moqtada al-Sadr. While the Iraqi government was slow in releasing statements in response to the recent mass protests that began

in October 2019, al-Khazali was quick to give an interview to the pan-Arab al-Jazeera network. The impact of the interview was clear, and although it did not stop the protests, it did explain the argument of Iran and its allies who view the protests as part of a conspiracy. ([YouTube](#), December 19, 2019).

The Rivalry With al-Sadr

The tension between al-Khazali and Moqtada al-Sadr has cooled down in recent years, as both gained greater political power and it was in their mutual interest to cooperate or at least not to fight. However, the rivalry between the two men and their movements remain a quite important aspect of Shia politics in Iraq. One of the aspects of the multi-layered conflict is the power struggle between al-Sadr's group from one side and al-Khazali's on the other. Al-Sadr has pursued a strategy aimed at controlling the protests and using its momentum to weaken his rivals while al-Khazali, alongside all of the other militias, have been vehemently opposed to the protests. In a high profile incident in the city of Amara in southern Iraq, protesters believed to be followers of al-Sadr attacked the local branch of AAH and lynched al-Khazali's representative in the province ([The New Khalij](#), October 25, 2019).

The dynamics in recent weeks showed that al-Sadr moved closer towards Iran's vision, which lowered the possibilities of further escalation with al-Khazali, but the rivalry between the two will remain a main feature of the Shia militia politics in Iraq.

More than 15 years since he split from al-Sadr, al-Khazali's movement is still significantly smaller than the one he left. Yet it is amazing

how steady and consistent his rise in Iraqi politics has been.

When news broke on the killing of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, rumors circulated that al-Khazali was arrested by U.S. special forces. The rumors were obviously not correct, but it shows the high levels of public resentment against al-Khazali, with enemies like the United States, Moqtada al-Sadr, and angry protesters across the Shia areas in Iraq. Al-Khazali is likely to experience hard times in the future.

The October Uprising

As al-Khazali was just starting to establish his movement as a main player in the Iraqi government, the anti-corruption protest movement broke out. The protests caught al-Khazali by surprise, and accusations of being responsible for the killing of protesters in Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq were quickly directed towards him and his men in the AAH. Al-Khazali's organization was at the center of the protester's anger, as it was considered a part of the corrupt political elite. The puritanical status that al-Khazali hoped that he and his group would stand for in the eyes of its Shia community never materialized.

In the face of the difficult situation the protests represented, al-Khazali resorted to an approach that has been central to the Iranian discourse in the Middle East. He started emphasizing and prioritizing his commitment to confront Israel. Although most of that commitment is merely rhetorical, it is still consistent in the discourse of Iran and its allies. But al-Khazali in the past has gone further than any other Iraqi militia leader in his efforts to confront Israel. In 2017, he stirred up a controversy in Lebanon when,

during one of his visits to the country, he went to the Israeli-Lebanese border area, which is controlled by Hezbollah, and was filmed using a Hezbollah radio to communicate messages about the situation on the ground. There, he pledged his support for and involvement in the anti-Israeli activities of Lebanese and Palestinian groups ([Arabi21](#), December 9, 2017).

Al-Khazali accused the protests of being orchestrated by a conspiracy involving Israel, the UAE, and Iraqi parties, with the United States playing an indirect role. He even put it in a broader regional context, claiming that the protests were part of U.S. President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan. Al-Khazali never admitted to any role in the series of crackdowns on the protesters, but he maintained his criticism and calls to end the demonstrations ([Asrar Media](#), October 1, 2019; [YouTube](#), October 1, 2019).

Iranian support for al-Khazali and other Shia militias will likely continue in the post-Soleimani era. Al-Khazali has not yet showed any sign that he would be true to his threat to avenge the killing of al-Muhandis and Soleimani. When the U.S. embassy in Baghdad was targeted by Katyusha rockets on January 8, al-Khazali was quick to deny responsibility and suggested another conspiracy theory that the CIA was behind the attack ([Baghdad Today](#), January 9). However, al-Khazali will always be committed to the anti-U.S. cause. With the accumulated experience gained in years of fighting in the Iraqi insurgency, Syrian civil war, and anti-IS campaign, he remains capable of launching attacks in different styles against his enemies. His next moves will most likely be made in full coordination with the other Iranian-backed Shia militias and as part of a larger Iranian strategy,

and they will come in al-Khazali's own distinct style.

Rafid Jaboori is a journalist, writer and researcher. He is a former BBC World Service Reporter. He covered The Iraq War and its aftermath, the conflict in Syria, and several other events. He is an expert in militant groups in the Middle East.

Filling the Void: A Profile of New Quds Force Commander Esmail Ghaani

Andrew Devereux

The death of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) Major General and head of the Quds Force Qasem Soleimani has caused significant international and domestic reverberations since he was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Baghdad on January 3. Internationally, the assassination escalated geopolitical tensions between Tehran and Washington. Still, despite adversarial rhetoric from both parties, the military response has been minimal, with Iran launching limited missile fire at U.S.-managed bases in Iraq ([Arab News](#), January 8). Domestically, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran, condemned the attack and vowed revenge, and moved quickly to replace Iran's most revered military leader in the face of widespread public outrage and mourning.

Within hours, it was confirmed that Quds Force Deputy Commander and Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani would succeed Soleimani. A major powerbroker in both the IRGC and Quds Force for many years, Ghaani is a hardliner and broadly subscribes to the same ideological principles as Soleimani ([Albawaba](#), January 13). Media appearances by Ghaani in Western and Iranian media have been rare, but Ghaani's profile indicates he has been installed as a continuity candidate.

The Man in the Background

Born in 1957 in Khorasan Province, little is known of Ghaani prior to him joining the IRGC in 1980. During the 1980-1988 war with Iraq, Ghaani and his 4th Nasr Division were deployed

to the frontline to fight Kurdish separatists in the western Kurdistan province. By the end of the war, Qhaani had risen to the chief of the 5th Nasr Division and built a close friendship with the chief of the 41st Sarallah Division, Qasem Soleimani ([Islamic Republic News Agency](#), January 3). The pair cultivated a long-standing loathing of the United States borne out of their experiences during the Iran-Iraq war.

Ghaani was nominated as deputy commander of the Quds Force in 1997, after occupying numerous senior positions in the IRGC. The exact remit of his role is unclear, but it is widely accepted that while Soleimani was in charge of Iran's foreign excursions to the west, a more high-profile brief, Ghaani forged relations and strategy in the east, with a particular focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan ([Gulf News](#), January 5).

The main aspects of his post were to stop potential ground invasions from the east—Tehran believed any U.S. invasion would use Afghanistan as a staging ground and move through Iran's eastern border—and to cultivate relations with Shia communities and organizations. Ghaani successfully forged relationships with Shia groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan and formed groups such as Liwa Zainebiyoun and Liwa al-Fatemioun, which were deployed to Syria to fight against Islamic State (IS), helping to achieve Tehran's strategic goal of keeping Bashir al-Assad in power ([Indian Express](#), January 13).

The Man at the Helm

Ghaani's past relationship with Soleimani and new position has bought him inevitable comparisons with the deceased commander, as the international community attempts to predict what sort of strategic agenda he will pursue. His

close relationship with both Soleimani and Khamenei undoubtedly played a part in his elevation, but there were many reasons for his promotion.

Ghaani was promoted to the leadership of the Quds Forces above other contenders who were seen as being more radical. The Khatam al-Anbia headquarters Major General Gholam Ali Rashid, who coordinates the Iranian armed forces, and Esmail Kousari, the current deputy chief of Sarallah headquarters in the IRGC, are two notable commanders. Both are first-generation IRGC commanders with significant operational and diplomatic experience. However, concerns about their ability to continue down the path forged by Soleimani impacted their chances. Kousari is an outspoken critic of President Rouhani, while Rashid has been tasked with reinvigorating the operational and tactical effectiveness of the Khatam al-Anbiya headquarters ([Tehran Times](#), November 24, 2019).

Since Soleimani's death, Khamenei has indicated what he expects from Ghaani and the Quds Force, stating that the organization will be unchanged from the time of his predecessor ([Ynet News](#), January 3). In the immediate term, this includes coordinating Iran's response to the United States following Soleimani's death while continuing to pursue Tehran's ultimate strategic goal of ending the U.S. military presence in the Middle East.

Continuity and minimizing the impact of Soleimani's death have been recurrent themes. Sanaei Rad, IRGC deputy for political affairs, emphasized this by saying that “enemies cannot create a void in the Islamic Republic” ([Islamic Azad University News Agency](#), January 2). Images from Tehran of both parliamentarians

and members of the public chanting “death to America” demonstrate how political and military leaders are using Soleimani's death to reinforce the public perception of the United States as the ultimate enemy ([Middle East Eye](#), January 6).

The speed of Ghaani's promotion to the top role is a reminder of the robust structures and processes that underpin both the Quds Force and the wider IRGC. Despite the U.S. designating the group as a terrorist organization, a move without precedent for a state actor, the Quds Force is a highly organized military organization. A succession process for high-level leadership is highly likely to have been in place for years, established through Ghaani's rapid promotion. Any Western hopes that cutting off the organization's head will cause the body to die are wide off the mark.

Ghaani - Continuity through Change

Despite all indications that Ghaani will be a continuity leader, there are some stark differences between Ghaani and Soleimani. In 2011, Ghaani publicly signed a letter condemning the actions of Hossein Alayi, a commander in the IRGC Navy, who criticized the policies of the Iranian Republic. Soleimani was notable for his absence among the signatories ([Albawaba](#), January 13). Ghaani has a staunchly hardline stance on Iran's domestic policies and has clashed with moderates, while Soleimani tolerated the viewpoints of the reformists and accepted a degree of need for increased political tolerance.

Soleimani was also a highly skilled diplomat and politician. While many aspects of Ghaani's profile remain unclear, it is highly unlikely he will be able to match Soleimani's levels of statesmanship. Soleimani's skill as a respected diplomat was demonstrated through his ability to

persuade Russian President Vladimir Putin to intervene in the Syrian conflict ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), January 7). Ghaani is seen as being more bureaucratic and administrative ([The Globe and Mail](#), January 7). Although the wider security strategy and regional agenda of the Quds Force is unlikely to be affected, it is unclear how Ghaani's different persona will impact procedural elements of the organization.

Ghaani's naturally more conservative character will lead him to pursue a different public presence to Soleimani, but he will need to strike a delicate balance. Soleimani was almost a celebrity figure and one of the most prominent men in Iran – a public role model. This level of public exposure will be unappealing to Ghaani. But as the head of the Quds Force, he still needs to hold public appeal and the ability to mobilize the masses.

Credible speculation has emerged, arguing that Soleimani's public profile contributed to his death. Western intelligence agencies were able to track his movements and strategies right up to the moment of his death in Baghdad. Ghaani will have to calculate how to remain a public figure able to exert significant influence while minimizing his exposure to danger and maintaining a lower profile.

Internal and External Relationships

Concern that Ghaani lacks Soleimani's cult of personality and charisma extends to his ability to forge and maintain internal and external relationships. Internally, Soleimani's death has huge ramifications for the Iranian regime and, more specifically, the wider IRGC. In recent years, IRGC commander-in-chief Hossein Salami has overhauled the top ranks of the IRGC, but the Quds Force became increasingly independent. In some respects, the line between

Quds Force and regular IRGC blurred after the Syrian conflict, as IRGC troops were deployed to Syria to secure key tactical sites, giving the Quds Force greater operational reach over the IRGC ([AGSIW](#), January 3).

Although internal power struggles are difficult to predict—particularly in the case of the regime in Iran, where political and military leaders attempt to present a united front—it remains credible that Salami will attempt to regain an element of control over the Quds Force. In terms of military positions, Salami is a major general while Ghaani remains a brigadier general, and Salami could attempt to capitalize on his more senior rank. Salami's eulogy for Soleimani portrayed a man who cannot be replaced, and it remains to be seen whether Salami will attempt to use Ghaani's fledgling leadership as an opportunity to expand his own power ([The Jerusalem Post](#), January 21). Ghaani will have to manage such internal dynamics delicately.

Ghaani will also be entrusted with maintaining relationships with Iran's many proxy militias, and the relationship with these allies is crucial for Iran's future foreign policy strategies. Allies include Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, Shia groups in Bahrain, as well as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip. Soleimani ensured these groups were provided with material and tactical assistance, and directed and coordinated operations with regional commanders.

These groups are vital to Iranian efforts to exert influence abroad. The regime is able to have a direct influence over the Iraqi parliament owing to its support of Shia militias such as Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq, while putting military pressure on Israel on both its northern and

southern borders through Iran's support of Hezbollah in Lebanon and southwestern Syria. Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary-General of Hezbollah, had a close friendship Soleimani ([Middle East Eye](#), January 17). The ability to forge and maintain relationships with the leaders of these proxy forces, while dictating operations and security strategies, is a key aspect of Ghaani's role.

Conclusion

There are many unknowns about Ghaani's leadership of the Quds Force, and the killing of Soleimani has undoubtedly destabilized the regime. Despite Iranian concerns that Ghaani lacks Soleimani's cult of personality, Ghaani is likely capable of maintaining the late commander's networks, and Iran's proxy forces will remain under the control of the Quds Force. Ghaani represents continuity, and he is unlikely to attempt wholesale changes in the strategies implemented by the group.

Despite this, Ghaani has significant responsibilities in the short term. The response to Soleimani's death will have to be carefully managed, although Iran appears to have decided against any significant direct military response. Ghaani is less of a politician than Soleimani, and will have to adapt to the fluctuating internal and external dynamics that the former commander's death has caused. In reality, the functioning of the Quds Force will be unchanged, and the group will remain committed to operations intended to force the U.S. military out of the Middle East.

Andrew Devereux is an Associate Analyst in Counter-Terrorism at Healix International and HX Global, focusing on terrorist incidents, actors and the wider MENA region.

Militant Leadership Monitor is a publication of The Jamestown Foundation. It is designed to be read by policymakers and other specialists, yet also be accessible to the general public. In order to purchase a subscription, please visit <https://jamestown.org/product-category/militant-leadership-monitor/mlm-subscription/>. Unauthorized reproduction or redistribution of this or any Jamestown publication is strictly prohibited by law.