



# MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

## Personalities Behind the Insurgency

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#### **Mullah Nangialai—Herat Shadow Governor of Taliban Splinter Group Killed in Airstrike**

*John Foulkes*

On January 8, a U.S. drone strike killed a commander of a Taliban splinter group in Afghanistan’s western Herat province. The commander, Mullah Nangialai, was an influential member of a Taliban splinter group, the High Council of the Afghanistan Islamic Emirate (HCAIE). The drone strike took place in the Shindand district of Herat and allegedly resulted in several dozen civilian casualties. Members of the Herat provincial council claim 60 civilians were killed. Eyewitnesses have claimed that approximately 30 members of the Taliban splinter group also died. Subsequent statements by local council members and Afghan human rights officials put the number of deaths at 10 civilians, including one women and three children, and 15 militants ([Tolo News](#), January 9; [Ariana News](#), January 9).

Nangialai has reportedly had a connection to the Taliban for much of his life, as his father, Amanullah, was a local strongman with ties to the militant group. Amanullah fought against Ismail Khan, the U.S.-supported governor of Herat, following 9/11 ([Afghan Analysts Network](#), April 20, 2016; [Afghan-bios](#), January 23, 2019).

Nangialai was one of many influential militant leaders who broke away from the Taliban in the leadership struggle following the death of its leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, which became public knowledge in July 2015. Muhammad Rasool, then the Taliban shadow governor of Farah province, contested the legitimacy of Akhtar Mansour’s ascension to leadership, and announced the formation of HCAIE from Herat ([Tolo News](#), November 2, 2015). Nangialai was made a commander of the new faction and Herat’s shadow governor ([Tolo News](#), January 10).

The HCAIE quickly came into conflict with Taliban loyalists. Nangialai’s forces fought the local forces affiliated with the organization in

Herat on multiple occasions, with much of the fighting taking place in the Zerkoh valley of the Shindand district. The valley has been a center of insurgency and Taliban activity since the beginning of the war. Small clashes broke out between Nangialai and the local Taliban loyalist commander Mullah Abdul Samad in December 2015, ending in a stalemate. Samad received reinforcements in the form of additional Taliban fighters from Quetta, Pakistan, and mounted an offensive on Nangialai's territory in March 2016. The fighting resulted in over a 100 militant deaths and the eviction of Nangialai's forces from the Zerkoh valley ([Afghan Analysts Network](#), April 20, 2016; [Pajhwok](#), March 9, 2016). In further clashes in December 2017, Samad was wounded and several of his commanders killed in fighting with Nangialai's forces ([Ariana News](#), December 20, 2017). Additional fighting was also reported in January 2019 ([Ariana News](#), January 23, 2019).

Nangialai and the HCAIE reportedly received assistance from Afghan intelligence sources. Nangialai's forces largely concentrated on fighting the Taliban, rather than the Afghan government, and it is possible that Afghan intelligence provided resources to Nangialai in order to divide the organization and ensure that the Taliban did not have complete control over the Zerkoh valley area. Following his death, a member of the Afghan parliament, Sattar Hussaini, was quoted as saying, "Nangialai was one of those who cooperated with the government—the National Directorate of Security" (the NDS is the Afghan government's primary intelligence agency). A retired Afghan general has also alleged that the HCAIE has received support from Iran ([Tolo News](#), January 10).

Analysts have raised the question of why Nangialai was killed now. Some have questioned the reasoning behind killing a militant leader who was actively fighting the Taliban in a remote, strategic region of the country. U.S. officials have said that the airstrike came at the request of Afghan forces on the ground ([Tolo News](#), January 9). Having been a figure of prominence in Herat due to his strong familial ties to the area, Nangialai's death will provide the Taliban with an opportunity to solidify their position in Herat.

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## Abu Hajar al-Hashemi: The Islamic State’s “Governor” of Sinai

*Jemimah Hudson*

### Wilayat Sinai’s Operations in the Sinai Peninsula

Militant Islamist violence in the Sinai Peninsula has increased significantly since 2013, with the Egyptian affiliate of Islamic State (IS), Wilayat Sinai, carrying out multiple attacks. Notably, the group downed a Russian passenger aircraft in October 2015, killing 224 people, and, in November 2017, it launched an assault on a Sufi mosque in Bir al-Abed, North Sinai. The latter proved to be the deadliest ever attack in Egypt ([Haaretz](#), November 25, 2017).

Meanwhile, the Egyptian military’s aggressive counterinsurgency tactics have heightened local resentment toward Cairo. Comprehensive Operation Sinai, launched in February 2018, involved the displacement of thousands of civilians living in the region and contributed to longstanding tensions between local tribes and security services. Wilayat Sinai has been able to capitalize on such tensions to increase support for its insurgency. Local economic issues, such as widespread poverty and unemployment, have at the same time continued to drive support for jihadists. Wilayat Sinai fighters in the North Sinai governorate have also traditionally come from local tribes and as such have extensive roots in nearby communities, making it more difficult for the government to uproot them.

### Abu Hajar al-Hashemi’s Leadership

Both the leadership and the lower ranks of Wilayat Sinai are typically filled with mainland Egyptians and Bedouins, although more specific details about its leadership are hard to come by, particularly as Egyptian security services purposely avoid disclosing them.

IS weekly al-Nabaa in December 2016 published news of the death of Wilayat Sinai’s former leader Abu Duaa al-Ansari (an Egyptian national) in an airstrike, while announcing his replacement as Abu Hajar al-Hashemi, a foreign national ([Jerusalem Post](#), January 28, 2018). IS media has since referred to al-Hashemi as the “governor” of the caliphate’s Sinai Province. Al-Hashemi is believed to be a former Iraqi army officer who was previously affiliated with the jihadist group Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, founded in 1999 by the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi ([Egypt Today](#), November 30, 2017).

Al-Hashemi gave an interview that appeared in the December 2016 edition of al-Nabaa, in which he attacked Cairo’s military campaign in Sinai and directly addressed Sinai residents. “We tell [the apostates]: blood for blood, destruction for destruction,” he said. “[We give our] necks for your necks. [We swear that] so long as there is blood in our veins, the apostates [Egyptian security forces] will not reach you.” He also appeared to dismiss the notion that the local population would work with Egyptian security forces to drive Wilayat Sinai out of the peninsula, stressing the noble qualities of tribesmen and stating that the few individuals who did cooperate with the Egyptian military would be quickly “plucked out”. [1]

Al-Hashemi’s leadership has, however, strained ties between Wilayat Sinai and the local population. An increase in foreign members—

including al-Hashemi himself, as well as defectors from the Izzedin al-Kassam brigades, the armed wing of Hamas—has threatened to undermine the organization’s longstanding ties with the local community and tribes ([Jerusalem Post](#), January 28, 2018). Under al-Hashemi’s leadership, the group has also increased its targeting of civilians. The group often executes local residents on charges of collaborating with Egyptian or Israeli intelligence services. For instance, Wilayat Sinai executed four individuals in the town of Bir al-Abd, in North Sinai, in July 2019 for alleged cooperation with the Egyptian security services ([Algemeiner](#), July 18, 2019). Meanwhile, Wilayat Sinai’s opposition to Bedouin smuggling operations—on the grounds of being contrary to Sharia law—has led to executions of local tribesmen. Indeed, militants kidnapped and later beheaded four Bedouins in the Rafah area in May 2017. ([Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs](#), May 29, 2017).

Moreover, Egyptian security forces named al-Hashemi as the “main perpetrator” of the 2017 attack on the Al-Rawdah Sufi mosque that killed around 300 people ([Egypt Today](#), November 30, 2017). This attack in particular alienated the Bedouins of the al-Tarbiyeen tribe—the largest on the Peninsula—who had helped Wilayat Sinai militants in the past, offering them information and even sanctuary. There is evidence that Wilayat Sinai has sought to de-escalate some of these tensions: in the North Sinai city of Rafah, for instance, the group has distributed leaflets moderating its hostility to the al-Tarbiyeen, saying that it was only in conflict with a “small disloyal portion” of the tribe.

## Conclusion

While such moves may reduce tensions with ordinary tribal members, the Egyptian government will continue to successfully co-opt some key tribal leaders and their followers, which will limit al-Hashemi’s ambitions to expand in the region. That said, Cairo is unlikely to significantly overhaul its approach to the Sinai insurgency -- for instance, through addressing socioeconomic grievances or softening its military-led approach. This will fuel continued support for Wilayat Sinai’s insurgency in Sinai under al-Hashemi.

Going forward, al-Hashemi is also likely to prioritize attacks on Israeli targets, including pipeline infrastructure, following a call by IS spokesperson Abu Hamza al-Qurashi in January for the group’s supporters to target Jewish interests ([Jerusalem Post](#), January 28). Al-Hashemi previously warned, in 2016, “we are getting closer to the [Israeli] border every day,” highlighting the group’s longstanding attempts to target Israel, in order to raise its profile and strengthen its political position ([Times of Israel](#), December 22, 2016).

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## Notes

[1] *al-Nabaa* 60, December 12, 2016

## The Men Who Ran IS Mosul— Profiles of Abu Abdul Bari and Kifah Bashir Hussein

*Halla Diyab*

Islamic State (IS) has consistently put presenting a polished image of jihadists at the forefront of their online social media propaganda campaign. However, that actions of IS jihadists out in the field stand in deep contrast to this virtual narrative. IS media pushed the image of its members as chivalrous, romantic poets, and “brave lions.” This narrative stands in deep contrast to the realities of its fighters and the atrocities they commit. IS propaganda seeks to portray jihadist actions as ultimately altruistic and fighting for “Islam in the land of jihad.” However, in reality, IS relied on an entirely different type of insurgent to run its local government in Mosul, Iraq. Profiles of the IS mufti Abu Abdul Bari and doctor Kifah Bashir Hussein more accurately reflect the reality of the group’s followers. These former functionaries within the organization’s government, both of whom are now imprisoned, offer insights into how IS governed Mosul.

### **The Mufti—Abu Abdul Bari**

IS mufti Abu Abdul Bari, a.k.a. Shifa al-Nima, was a prominent member of IS’ propaganda apparatus. Bari often pushed the idealized archetypes of IS jihadists as strong and fit fighters, despite the fact that he himself cannot move easily due to the fact that he weighs over 500 pounds. When he was arrested in Mosul on January 17, he had to be transported by truck ([Al-Bayan](#), January 17).

Bari was a senior militant in IS. He reportedly helped to organize the creation of several armed factions before the rise of IS. Bari was responsible for issuing multiple fatwas between 2006 and 2014 that argued for the killing of Iraqi security forces in Mosul. Bari’s sons, Abdul al-Bari and Abdul Hadi, pledged allegiance to IS. They both worked in filming their father’s sermons at mosques calling for youth to join the group. Both of his sons were later arrested. Abdul Hadi was sentenced to death and Abdul Bari sentenced to five years in prison by a court in the province of *Sulaymaniyah* ([Al-Arabiya](#), January 24).

Besides his role as a mufti in the IS insurgency, Bari founded a school known as “Abdula al-Nima,” which taught many terrorists. Among his students was the personal bodyguard of IS leader Abu Bakr al-*Baghdadi* and other senior officials of the terrorist group. Badr was also part of the education ministry in Nineveh governorate, from which over 50 militants graduated ([El Watan News](#), January 25).

Bari issued fatwas in his capacity as chief of the Sharia court in Mosul, which is an offshoot of the IS government’s “Judicial and Grievance *Diwan* (ministry).” After being arrested, Bari admitted to issuing fatwas that led to the deaths, stoning and fining of people in Mosul. Bari taught at the University of Mosul during the IS occupation until he was fired due to disagreements with his colleagues, and then resumed his preaching at mosques, where he used the pulpit to continue encouraging young Iraqis to join the terrorist group. He also used the mosque as a platform to issue fatwas against those who smoked cigarettes, to call for the expulsion of Christians outside Mosul, and to justify the raping and selling of Yazidi women by

IS militants. Bari also ordered the destruction of a mosque built at the site believed to be the burial place of the biblical prophet Jonah ([Ajel](#), January 24).

When operations to liberate Mosul began, Bari called for militants to fight the Iraqi forces. When those forces attacked eastern Mosul, Bari fled to his daughter's house in Mothana province for two months until the Iraqi forces arrived there. He then moved between different locations, and remained hidden until security forces raided his house near Mosul ([Alrai](#), January 24).

### **The Doctor—Kifah Bashir Hussein**

IS' strategy of attempting to glamourize jihadists could be seen in the group's media promoting Western-origin insurgents like Jihadi John, the ISIS Beatles, and others. These jihadists served IS' aim of becoming ubiquitous online and in international news, where the group could exhibit images of their atrocities, helping them promote their ideology. However, underneath this idealized façade lies the operators who are more functionally influential than those visible in the public sphere. An example of this is' former health minister, Kifah Bashir Hussein.

### **Criminality**

Kifah Bashir Hussein, 41, was the IS government's health minister, appointed after his predecessor was killed by a bomb in Mosul. Soon after the group lost control over the city, Hussein moved his base of operations into Syria before he fled to Turkey, where he was arrested. Prior to becoming a senior IS operative, Hussein was a rheumatology doctor. He had been active within IS and the group's predecessor organizations, Jama'at Tawhid wal-Jihad and then al-Qaeda in Iraq, going back to 2004. He was arrested by Turkish forces in 2018 ([Arabic.CNN](#), March 3, 2018).

Hussein was born to a family who converted from the Shia sect of their tribe to Sunni in the 1970s. Raised in Tal Afar, a Turkmen-majority city in Iraq, the 2003 Iraq invasion reportedly radicalized him, and he was part of the first group to fight the Americans, Jama'at Tawhid wal-Jihad, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Hussein managed the group's health services. He was allegedly detained in a Mosul prison after being accused of membership in a terrorist group, but was released after a short period ([Islamion](#), March 3, 2018).

After his release from prison, Hussein reportedly ended his overt affiliation with terrorist groups in the city, and worked as a doctor in the Ibn Sina hospital in Mosul. When IS took over Mosul in 2014, Hussein joined the group. He was responsible for several IS war crimes, including blood collection from IS prisoners and kidney extraction from the dead ([Arabi21](#), March 3, 2018).

Hussein's first wife fled Mosul to Baghdad after IS took over the city. He then reportedly took a second wife who was the daughter of an influential IS leader. She was reported to have been part of the group dispatched to treat IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi after he was injured in 2015 ([Alraimedia](#), March 4, 2018).

Unlike the public faces of IS, Hussein had the qualities that the group's leadership needed to succeed. He is not only devoted to the ideology, but stayed off the watchlists of Western and Iraqi intelligence agencies in the early days of IS' rise. These qualities won him the confidence of al-Baghdadi, who selected him to set up a hospital in al-Kasrah, a Syrian village located

between Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, to provide advanced treatment for IS fighters.

## Conclusion

The ideological and theological devotion of IS members like Bari and Hussein accurately reflect IS jihadists. Unlike the images projected by IS media groups of foreign fighters happily traveling to the “land of Islam” for jihad, the group governed through local radicals like Bari and Hussein, who existed outside of society before the occupation and rose to prominence by maintaining ideological purity and serving the organization. Following the fall of the caliphate, they lost their purpose with the organization and went into hiding until their eventual capture. Bari and Hussein’s roles in IS highlight how the group gives a space and role to misfits who do not project the idealized image of battlefield fighters, and thus remain in the background, orchestrating the group’s strategies, recruiting process, and ideological structure.

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## Fugitive Bangladeshi Ideologue Tamim al-Adnani Spearheading Virtual Jihadist Campaign

*Animesh Roul*

In August 2013, a Bangladeshi court in Barguna district jailed several members of the extremist outfit Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), including its spiritual leader Mufti Jasimuddin Rahmani, for subversive activities in the country. These ABT members were accused of widespread violence and targeted killings during the Shahabag protest movement held earlier that year. The incarceration of Rahmani brought his fellow cleric Tamim al-Adnani to the forefront of the terrorist group as its spiritual head. In 2013-2014, the ABT was a relatively new grouping whose activities were not widely known. Tamim al-Adnani rose to prominence as a firebrand ideologue and preacher, and subsequently became more notorious than Rahmani. He came to be known for his vitriolic criticism against Bangladeshi and Western governments, and for his exhortations for violence and jihad.

The subsequent investigations into ABT’s inner circle revealed that the group was modelled on the lines of al-Qaeda and that it existed with the blessings of ideologues like Ayman al-Zawahiri and Anwar al-Awlaki ([Dhaka Tribune](#), May 25, 2015). The ABT, which eventually morphed into Ansar al-Islam-Bangladesh, has been operating based upon al-Zawahiri’s call for a popular uprising (*intifada*) against the Bangladeshi government, and has worked to support ‘scholars of Islam. It has become the official branch of al-Qaeda’s South Asian chapter, al-Qaeda in

Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) ([Dhaka Tribune](#), March 5, 2017). Between 2013 and 2016, ABT, aka Ansar al-Islam, began carrying out machete attacks, killing 12 mostly-secular or progressive scholars, writers, and LGBT activists. According to Bangladeshi police, Tamim al-Adnani and Rezwanaul Azad Rana, the chief architects of these targeted attacks, fled Bangladesh perhaps at different times following the countrywide crackdown against the Ansarullah militant network. While Rana fled to Malaysia in February 2014, the exact time and other details of al Adnani's escape to Malaysia was not known ([Daily Star](#), February 24, 2017).

### **Elusive and Vociferous Fugitives**

The Bangladeshi police learned that al-Adnani was functioning as the spiritual head of the group in November 2014, when they intercepted a Skype call between two militants in Pakistan and Bangladesh as part of their investigations into the ABT network. The investigators also gathered information on Saiful Islam, who had just taken over as chief of the ABT operations team. During that time, both al-Adnani and Rana were present in Bangladesh ([Jugantar Report](#), November 7, 2014).

Although al-Adnani's real name and identity remains a mystery, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) of the Bangladeshi police believe that he is one of the five founding members and the top three current leaders of the group. He is presently believed to be hiding in Malaysia and engaged in broadcasting jihadist sermons via online social media platforms ([Dhaka Tribune](#), April 9, 2017). The other fugitives who fled Bangladesh were Maj. Syed Ziaul Haque and Rezwanaul Azad Rana. While Rana, a death row convict, was deported from Malaysia in early

2017 in connection with the 2013 killing of blogger Ahmed Rajib, the locations of al-Adnani and Ziaul Haque are still unknown ([Daily Star](#), February 21, 2017).

Limited information exists about the early life and education of al-Adnani in Bangladesh. However, various interrogation reports shed light on his entry into the world of Islamic extremism and jihad. In 2014, the ABT's media branch chief Morshed Islam released some vital information about the elusive al-Adnani. According to him, al-Adnani and Jasimuddin Rahmani have close ties with the Jordanian-born British citizen Sheikh Abu Issa Ali, who was the leader of the international organization Jamaat ul-Muslimeen. During Abu Issa's visit to Bangladesh in 2002, both al-Adnani and Rahmani met with him, and later they all travelled to the Pakistani city of Karachi on the invitation of the online extremist forum Bab-ul Islam. These events could have instigated the visiting Bangladeshi Islamist clerics to later focus on virtual jihadist propagation ([Jugantar Report](#), November 7, 2014). It should be noted that the Bab-ul Islam online forum was a pioneer in promoting and hosting al-Qaeda's jihadist literatures and related extremist content on the internet in regional languages, including Urdu and Bengali.

### **Lure of al-Qaeda**

Al-Adnani explained why he joined al-Qaeda and why a true Muslim should only join this terrorist group in online speeches published in late 2014. Aiming to recruit young Bengalis into Ansarullah or al-Qaeda's fold, he gave 12 reasons for joining al- According to him, everybody should join al-Qaeda since it has chosen the path of armed jihad to defend

persecuted and oppressed Muslims across the globe. Al-Adnani praised Osama bin Laden and explained how the martyred terrorist leader had renounced a life of luxury in Saudi Arabia to wage jihad to protect Muslims. Invoking Qur'anic verses, al-Adnani justified al-Qaeda's pursuit of 'jihad' as the way to establish and defend the religion. In his speech, he quoted several Islamic eschatological epithets to defend and justify al-Qaeda's version of jihad, citing for example, the Day of Resurrection, the final Victorious Group, (*At-Taifatul Mansura*), and *al-Ghuraba* (Strangers, or foreign fighters). Al-Adnani stressed that al-Qaeda truly follows the Salafist creed (*Aqeedah*) of *Al-Wala Wal Bara* (Loyalty and Rejection).

Al-Adnani argued that al-Qaeda respects and remembers true Islamic warriors and scholars, and wages jihad following the paths shown by them. He named several Islamic scholars who were part of al-Qaeda and guided the organisation, including Abdullah Azam, Yahya al-Libby, Sami al-Oraydi, Anwar al-Awlaki and Asim Umar, the first leader of al-Qaeda's South Asian branch. [1]

### **Virtual Ummah**

Al-Adnani has produced and disseminated his Islamist content through various online social media platforms, which include YouTube, Facebook, and SoundCloud. His messages are mostly presented in a preaching style, and involve explanations of the core beliefs and practices of Islam. Other videos are motivational, encouraging Muslims to be true to the religion in accordance with the Qur'an and Sharia. One of his earliest messages discuss the benefits of *dawah* (the invitation to Islam) and Islamic prayers, and explain how individual piety

would help Muslims and Islam at large ([YouTube](#), August 27, 2016; [YouTube](#), September 7, 2016).

Al-Adnani's extremism becomes evident when he speaks on defending Islam and exhorts Bangladeshi youths to fight against the government, or monologues about the final battle for India (*Gazwatul Hind*), civil wars in Yemen, Syria and about atrocities committed against persecuted Muslim minorities such as the Rohingya in Myanmar and the Uighurs in China. Two of his dedicated YouTube channels are particularly popular: 'Ummah Network' which has almost 200 posts, is followed by 382,000 subscribers. The newer 'Ummah News' channel has over 25,000 subscribers as of the time of writing. Both channels regularly publish new Islamist materials. The Facebook page of 'Ummah Network' has over 17,000 followers. [2]

Al-Adnani's most recent post, which is about sectarian unrest and rioting in the Indian capital of New Delhi, is titled "Muslim Genocide of Delhi: 'Gazwatul Hind can be heard in the footsteps'" (translation), and was published on February 29. The video discusses anti-Muslim violence, shows selected footage of Muslims being targeted, mosque desecration and speeches from Hindu right-wing leaders ([YouTube](#), February 29; [Facebook](#), February 29). Another anti-Indian lecture, published in April 2019, called on Muslim youths to take up arms to prevent anti-Muslim violence in India and elsewhere. The video further exhorted Muslims to rise against "apostate" forces working against Islam in regions perceived to be under attack. ([YouTube](#), April 13, 2019).

A video published on March 29, 2019 focuses on how the Crusades have been forgotten by

Muslims today ([YouTube](#), March 29, 2019). Al-Adnani often urges Muslim believers and clerics to raise their voices against both the Indian and Bangladeshi governments and to target rising Hindu nationalism.

These incendiary messages are often cross-posted to the YouTube channel ‘Ummah News.’ This channel became active in early 2019 and has nearly 40 posts that mostly discuss alleged regional anti-Muslim activities, in places such as Kashmir and Xinjiang. There are also many videos critical of the governments of the United States, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, which are referred to as ‘*taghut*’ and ‘*kuffar*’ (unbelievers and infidels).

### **In the Crosshairs: UN and NGOs**

One of al-Adnani’s recent videos vehemently criticised UN peacekeeping forces. Al-Adnani condemned the UN’s mission, as well as the Bangladeshi army’s active participation in UN-sponsored missions “against Muslims” across the world. The video was peppered with images of officials in the Bangladeshi peacekeeping contingent and cited official UN documents. It criticized the Bangladeshi government for making the Bangladeshi military personnel “team up with enemies.” The video specifically referred to Bangladeshi peacekeepers and military as *taghut* for working in the interest of Western powers (described in the video as “crusaders”) ([YouTube](#), November 22, 2019).

Al-Adnani’s messages have also targeted Bangladeshi civil society organizations such as the Move Foundation and BRAC. On the Ummah Network channel, al-Adnani targeted the Move Foundation last October for allegedly carrying out the work of Western governments,

and accused it of working with ‘infidels and crusaders’ ([YouTube](#), October 23, 2019). Note that the Move Foundation has two overseas partners—the Counter-Terrorism Capacity Building Program (CTCBP) of the Canadian Department of Global Affairs, and the German Embassy in Dhaka. The Move Foundation works to promote religious tolerance among Bangladeshi youth. Al-Adnani’s diatribe against the Move Foundation was later featured in the pro-al-Qaeda Bengali language periodical *Al-Balagh* (Issue No. 7). The 88-page magazine focused on jihad and the importance of establishing Sharia law in Bangladesh. On January 6, al-Adnani posted another video on the topic of BRAC and its founder Fazle Hasan Abed, criticising Abed for playing into the hands of Western governments. The Dhaka-based BRAC organization works to assist underprivileged people and raise awareness about human rights issues in Bangladesh ([YouTube](#), January 6).

### **Conclusion**

Social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook have emerged as powerful, far-reaching platforms for extremists like al-Adnani. A cursory look at the subscription statistics on his YouTube videos suggests that al-Adnani is an alarmingly effective voice for AQIS in Bangladesh, able to reach large numbers of Bengali-speaking Muslims in the region and internationally. Al-Adnani is among the most influential of the online extremist propagandists who continue to post on Western social media platforms, despite recent efforts by these companies to censor hateful and extremist content. With his typical style of preaching laced with emotional narrations of events, al-Adnani tries to capture the imaginations of disparate

Muslim youths, and urges them to ‘rise up’ against perceived atrocities aimed at their community. Tamim al-Adnani is now considered al-Qaeda’s most vociferous Bengali language propagandist and influencer, who has spearheaded extremist campaigns by exploiting online media platforms with impunity. He has achieved this while continuing to remain in hiding.

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## Notes

[1] “Why I joined al-Qaeda,” Tawhid and Jihad, October 19, 2014, <https://tawhidandjihad.wordpress.com/2014/10/19/কেন-আমি-আল-কায়েদাহকে-বাছা/>

[2] Tamim Al Adnani’s Facebook page announces the purpose is to spread the correct information of Islam to everyone, See, <https://www.facebook.com/ummahnetwork.un/>

## Abdul Reza Shahlai: The IRGC’s Man in Yemen

*Brian M. Perkins*

On January 3, the same day the United States conducted the airstrike that killed Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander Qasem Soleimani and prominent Iraqi politician and militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the United States also attempted a drone strike on Abdul Reza Shahlai, the IRGC’s deputy commander in Yemen ([Al Jazeera](#), January 10). The seemingly coordinated strikes paint a different picture of the supposed imminent threat that Soleimani posed and was used to justify killing him. The strike serves as an important reminder of Shahlai’s history in Iraq and his operational closeness and overlap with Soleimani and prominent Iraqi militia leaders. It also illuminates the common threads between Iranian tactics in Iraq and Yemen.

Abdul Reza Shahlai, a.k.a Hajji Yussef, was reportedly born in Kermanshah, Iran, circa 1957. Shahlai joined the IRGC in 1980 during the Iran-Iraq war, the same time as Soleimani, and became a member of the Quds force in 1988 ([Al Arabiya](#), January 11). Shahlai is one of the least known prominent Quds force commanders, and Iranian state media has rarely, if ever, publicly acknowledged his existence. Little documentation exists of Shahlai’s career in the IRGC prior to 2003, when Iran began ramping up support for Shia militants in Iraq. Along with Soleimani, Shahlai was one of the chief architects of Iraq’s most notorious Shia militias, including Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah, which were then referred to as “Special Groups.”

In 2003, Shahlai and Soleimani hosted a meeting in Tehran of high-ranking members of Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi, one of the most prominent Shia groups that intermittently fought against coalition forces. Among those who attended the meeting was Sadr's then trusted advisor, Qais al-Khazali ([AEI](#), August 2018). Interrogation reports following al-Khazali's detention alongside his brother Laith al-Khazali and Ali Mousa Daqdoq, a senior Lebanese Hezbollah leader, by U.S. officials in 2007 have been the source of much of the information pertaining to Shahlai's activity in Iraq.

The 2003 meeting marked a significant turning point for Iran's involvement in Iraq, ultimately helping shift support from a relatively diminutive amount of money to not only increased funding but also more strategic and tactical support ([USCENTCOM](#), August 2018). It is worth noting that 2003 was also when Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis founded Kataib Hezbollah and Sadr loyalists began to fracture, eventually paving the way for new groups, including al-Khazali's Asaib Ahl al-Haq. Shahlai was reportedly the Special Groups' primary point of contact within Iran and worked with each Shia militia independently, rather than attempting to consolidate them under a more unified command. This suggests he was likely also the main contact for Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and others ([USCENTCOM](#), August 2018). This strategy is particularly significant when looking at Iraq's current political scene. Rather than fostering a more cohesive unit with leanings toward Iran, Shahlai helped build the profile of multiple leaders and encouraged them to become more politically active. This helped Iran avoid being single-threaded to any one leader and widen its influence within Iraqi politics.

Iranian support picked up significantly in 2004, following Jaysh al-Madi's poor performance against coalition forces in Najaf ([USCENTCOM](#), August 2018). Shahlai used these battles as evidence of the group's lack of training and capabilities and traveled to Najaf to speak directly with the Sadrists to offer support in fighting the "occupiers." Shortly after this visit, the first batch of fighters was sent to Iran for military training with the IRGC. Throughout his stint in Iraq, Shahlai continued to be the approving authority responsible for coordinating military training for Iraqi militia members, not only with the IRGC in Iran, but also with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Shahlai was also the primary contact and facilitator for weapons transfers, including 122mm Grad rockets, 240mm rockets, 107mm Katyushas, RPG-7s, 81mms, 60mm mortars, and a large quantity of C-4 (which coincided with the proliferation of deadly explosively formed penetrator (EFP)-based IEDs ([Treasury.gov](#), September 16, 2008).

The operations that Shahlai is most known for are an attack on U.S. troops in Karbala and a plot to assassinate Saudi Arabia's then-ambassador to the United States, Adel al-Jubeir, at a restaurant in Washington in 2011. The attack in Karbala took place on January 20, 2007, when gunmen dressed in U.S. style military uniforms bypassed Iraqi security checkpoints and raided the Provincial Joint Coordination Center, killing one U.S. soldier and wounding three others ([DoD](#), January 26, 2007). The assailants took four other soldiers hostage before executing them in Babil the same day. This attack led to al-Khazali's arrest later in 2007 and the determination that Shahlai helped Asaib Ahl al-Haq finance and plan the attack. This attack, along with the information revealed by al-Khalazai led the United States to sanction

Shahlai and prominent Special Group leaders such as Harakat al-Nujaba's leader Akram Abbas al-Kabi in September 2008 for "threatening the peace and stability of Iraq by planning Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) Special Groups attacks against Coalition Forces in Iraq" ([Treasury.gov](https://www.treasury.gov), September 16, 2008). Shahlai reportedly coordinated the serious, but half-baked plot to kill Adel al-Jubeir with his cousin Manssor Arbabsiar, who was a naturalized U.S. citizen ([Treasury.gov](https://www.treasury.gov), October 11, 2011). Shahlai approved a \$100 million reward for Arbabsiar to recruit a bomber through a Mexican cartel. However, the plot was ultimately thwarted by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency and led the U.S. to again designate Shahlai, along with his conspirators.

It is unclear when Shahlai's responsibility for Iraq was shifted, but his role within the country and efforts to target U.S. assets there were significant. His involvement and support for Shia militias was undoubtedly fundamental to shaping Iranian influence as well as the political landscape in Iraq, with militia leaders such as Khazali still playing a prominent role.

### **Shahlai's Fingerprints in Yemen**

The Houthis have benefitted most from Iranian largesse through financing, military training, weapons transfers (one of Shahlai's specialties in Iraq), information/media, and political organization. At the start of the war, the Houthis' ties to Iran were quite tenuous, but they have grown significantly in recent years, undoubtedly due to Shahlai's patronage. Shahlai's exact activities in Yemen, however, are not well-documented, and confirmation of his presence in Sanaa only came in December 2019 via a \$15 million reward issued through the U.S.

State Department's Rewards for Justice program ([rewardsforjustice.net](https://rewardsforjustice.net), December 5, 2019). It is no surprise that Shahlai was tasked with coordinating and fostering Tehran's relationship with the Houthis given his years of experience in financing proxies and developing their capabilities. While his exact involvement in Yemen is still shrouded in mystery, his fingerprints are apparent in the ways the Houthis' capabilities have expanded. As in Iraq, he is likely the authorizing authority for financial support, weapons smuggling, and training for the Houthis.

At the start of the war, the Houthis' military capabilities primarily stemmed from becoming the benefactors of weapons and equipment brought along by Yemeni military units that aligned themselves with the group, or weapons and equipment that were abandoned by units unexpectedly routed by Houthi offensives. Improvements in the Houthis' weapons capabilities have come in several forms—the ability to modify and deploy missiles already in the Yemeni stockpile, access to Iranian missiles and significantly improved drone capabilities. Many of the ballistic missiles that have been fired into Saudi Arabia were from existing Yemeni stockpiles. However, debris from impact sites indicated significant modifications used to improve aerodynamics and increase missile range, a technical capability few believe was homegrown.

The Houthis have also employed more sophisticated cruise missiles, such as the "Quds-1," which were not previously accounted for in the Yemeni military stockpile and appear to be derivatives of the Iranian Soumar ([Terrorism Monitor](https://terrorismmonitor.com), July 3, 2019). Similarly, the Houthis unveiled the fixed-wing Qasef-1 drone,

which is nearly identical to the Iranian Ababil-T, which is also believed to be the platform Hezbollah employs and rebranded as the Mirsad-1 ([Terrorism Monitor](#), September 11, 2017). Along with these high impact weapons and small arms, another signature of Iranian involvement has been the proliferation of more sophisticated EFPs in Yemen, which are a relatively new development within the country. The proliferation of these devices also occurred in Iraq shortly after Shahlai began escalating support to Shia militias. Components used in the construction of EFPs in Yemen, including C-4 and electrical parts, have been traced back to Iran, and the tactic of concealing them in synthetic rocks closely mimics tactics used by Hezbollah and Shia militias in Iraq. [1]

Along with weapons transfers by sea and overland routes through Oman, Iran has also been significantly involved in financing the Houthis through a variety of means. These include strategic advice for fundraising and using shell companies to transfer oil to the Houthis, which the group then sells to raise funds. The UN Panel of Experts on Yemen has estimated that upwards of \$30 million worth of fuel per month has been donated to the Houthis through Iranian shell companies. It has identified at least four tankers that on loaded fuel in Iran but had false manifests indicating the fuel was onboarded in Oman ([UN](#), January 27).

Shahlai is also likely responsible for coordinating the relationship with Hezbollah through his longstanding ties to the organization and his Quds force counterpart in Lebanon. The scope and scale of Hezbollah's role within Yemen is unclear, with intermittent but unconfirmed reports of Hezbollah members being present in Yemen ([Middle East Monitor](#), February 6). What

is more clear, however, is that Hezbollah has provided financing and training and has played a particularly significant role in the Houthis media and information operations, helping to establish the Beirut-based Al-Masirah media outlet ([treasury.gov](#), August 22, 2013). Hezbollah also provides a political template the Houthis would ideally like to emulate, and it likely advised them on the formation of the group's Supreme Political Council. In addition to training with Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthi leaders have openly traveled to meet with Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah ([Asharq Al-Awsat](#), August 20, 2018).

The attempted strike will likely prompt Shahlai to operate more cautiously or to be recalled to Iran to coordinate from afar and thereby avoid the potential loss of another significant leader. Regardless, Shahlai's involvement and the support Iran has provided has mimicked his role in Iraq and has granted the Houthis capabilities that have made the group even more resilient and that could sustain it for years to come. Likewise, the relationship Iran helped build between the Houthis and Hezbollah is only likely to grow. It is reasonable to believe that if Iranian military support slowed, due to the end of hostilities and start of a political settlement in Yemen, that Hezbollah would continue to provide political guidance to the Houthis on how to negotiate post-conflict settlements.

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## Notes

[1] Radio-Controlled, Passive Infrared-Initiated IEDs, *Conflict Armament Research*. [https://www.conflictarm.com/download-file/?report\\_id=2598&file\\_id=2600](https://www.conflictarm.com/download-file/?report_id=2598&file_id=2600)

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