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Aslam Farooqi: Head of Islamic State-Khorasan Arrested

John Foulkes

On April 4, an operation conducted by Afghanistan's intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), successfully captured the head of Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), Aslam Farooqi, along with 19 other militants ([TOLO News](#), April 4; [Al Jazeera](#), April 4). Farooqi was arrested during a multi-day operation in the southern province of Kandahar. According to a NDS commander involved in the operation, the arrest of a weapons supplier provided information that led to Farooqi's arrest ([TOLO News](#), April 6).

Farooqi, born as Abdullah Orakzai, is originally from the Orakzai district, Khyber Pakhtunkwa province in Pakistan. Farooqi is a member of the Mamozay tribe of the Orakzai clan. He reportedly has four children and is believed to be approximately 55 years old. Farooqi reportedly began his militant career by first joining the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) jihadist group and was later a commander in Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) (see [MLM](#), October 4, 2018; [Anadolu Agency](#),

April 30; [Hindustan Times](#), April 9). More recently, he became a commander of Islamic State's military wing operating in Peshawar city, Pakistan, before being deployed to the Achin district of Afghanistan's eastern province of Nangarhar ([TOLO News](#), April 4). Farooqi was also the commander of IS-K operations in Pakistan's Khyber agency. The NDS statement released following Farooqi's captured stated that he was placed in charge of IS-K by Islamic State's central leadership following the killing of his predecessor, Abu Saeed Bajawori, by Afghan and U.S. forces in 2018 ([Pajhwok](#), April 4).

However, the United Nations said in a July 2019 report that his promotion came later—in April 2019. According to the report, Abu Omar al-Khorasani, who became IS-K leader in late 2018, was demoted by a delegation representing Islamic State's central leadership for "poor performance" in battles in Nangarhar. The same delegation promoted Farooqi to the leader's position ([UN Security Council](#), July 19, 2019).

Farooqi's rise to power fomented a factional split within IS-K based on regional and ethnic background. A sizable portion of the organization consisting of those of Central Asian

origin and veterans of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) who joined IS-K when it was founded suspected Farooqi, due to his LeT and TTP past, of having connections with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency ([Afghanistan Analysts](#), July 23, 2017). Refusing to recognize Farooqi's leadership, this group *de facto* split from the larger organization, and began operating under the leadership of the mysterious Moavia Uzbeki. Uzbeki's faction reportedly focused its operations in the northeastern provinces of Afghanistan, while Farooqi's forces were in the eastern and southeastern provinces (see [MLM](#), December 10, 2018). This has been given some credence by the fact that Farooqi was arrested in Kandahar province, in the country's south.

Farooqi rose to IS-K's leadership during a perilous time for the organization. Since the group's founding in 2015, it has consistently been fighting with coalition forces, the Afghan government, and the Taliban. IS-K has experienced losses in what was its stronghold in Nangarhar province. Over four years, the U.S. launched numerous airstrikes while Afghan forces on the ground launched counterterrorism operations. Notably, during this time, IS-K was also defeated in several battles by the Taliban. These operations culminated in a seven-week operation that effectively dislodged IS-K from the province. In November 2019, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said the group was "obliterated" in Nangarhar ([Al-Araby](#), November 19, 2019).

However, this was an over exaggeration. While the group was routed in its traditional stronghold, Farooqi and IS-K were still able to plan and carryout several large-scale notable terrorist attacks. The group claimed responsibility for an attack on March 25 on a Sikh gurudwara in Kabul, which killed 25 people and wounded eight. According to some reports, Farooqi directly oversaw the planning of the

gurudwara attack ([Al Jazeera](#), March 25; [MENAFN](#) April 5). A Shia gathering attended by Afghan Chief Executive and self-proclaimed president, Abdullah Abdullah, was attacked, killing 27 and wounding 29 ([Al Jazeera](#), March 6).

A diplomatic row between Afghanistan and Pakistan has emerged as a result of Farooqi's arrest. On April 9, Pakistan's foreign ministry summoned the Afghan ambassador to formally request Farooqi's extradition to Pakistan, citing IS-K activities within their country. The Afghan foreign ministry refused the request, citing the lack of an extradition treaty between the two countries, and the fact that Farooqi is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Afghans and thus would be tried there ([Dawn](#), April 21). Some Afghan officials have alleged that Pakistan's request is motivated by fears that his arrest will expose connections between IS-K and the ISI ([Anadolu Agency](#), April 30).

Farooqi's arrest is the latest in a long line of recent setbacks for IS-K. Loss of territory and the deaths or arrests of hundreds of its fighters over the past year has diminished its operational capability. The arrest is the sixth loss of an IS-K leader since the group's founding in 2015 and will force the group to pick yet another leader, a process which might exacerbate the ethnic and regional tensions that has already factionalized the group.

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AQIM's Next Generation Mauritanian Theologian, Archivist and Mediator: Abu Numan Qutayba al-Shinqiti

Jacob Zenn

Since al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)'s formation in 2007, its most important members have not only been militants, but also theologians. The latter, such as Abu Ubaydah Yusuf Annabi, have justified AQIM's tactics, including suicide bombings, and AQIM's targeting, including on Algerian and West African security forces and Western civilians ([France24](#), May 30, 2019). Although other leading AQIM theologians, like Abu al-Hassan Rasheed al-Bulaydi, who was eulogized by Aymen al-Zawahiri in 2015, have been Algerian, a significant number of younger AQIM theologians are Mauritanian ([As-Sahab](#), January 16, 2017). One increasingly influential and young Mauritanian AQIM theologian is Abu Numan Qutayba al-Shinqiti. [1]

The Theologian

Little seems to have been reported about al-Shinqiti's upbringing or education. However, like other Mauritanian AQIM commanders and theologians—including, for example, former Mali-based Hamadou Kheiry and Khalid al-Shinqiti—he likely joined after the Mauritanian government's crackdown on Islamists in 2003, or after AQIM's predecessor, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), rebranded as AQIM in 2007 ([Al-Akhbar](#), March 11, 2012). This coincided with GSPC-turned-AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel's pledge of loyalty to Osama bin Laden.

Whenever al-Shinqiti joined AQIM, it was not until 2015 that he first appeared publicly on a

jihadist magazine's cover, which featured one of his poems (Al-Huda Issue #1, December 2015). He also appeared separately a year earlier in an AQIM video, which detailed AQIM's release of the French-Serbian hostage Serge Lazarevic ([rfi.fr](#), December 9, 2014; [Al-Andalus](#), December 21, 2015). In the video, al-Shinqiti maintained the aura of an Islamic scholar, despite his relatively youthful age, especially compared to the likes of Annabi and al-Bulaydi. Captioned as a sharia judge and sitting beside several veiled AQIM members, he exalted God for granting AQIM success and thanked God for the release of AQIM members in exchange for Lazarevic. In addition, he cited the seventh-century Muslim caliph, Omar ibn Khattab, to assert that "rescuing one Muslim captive is dearer to me than expelling the polytheists from the Arabian Peninsula" ([Al-Andalus](#), December 21, 2015).

Al-Shinqiti lastly introduced the fighters beside him in the video, whose names indicated they were likely from Mali (al-Bambari and al-Fulani), Western Sahara (al-Sahrawi) and Tunisia (al-Tunisi). Three other militants' names in the video lacked ethnic or geographic connotation, however. Because Lazarevic was kidnapped in Mali in 2011 and released to Niger's government in Niamey, and several fighters surrounding al-Shinqiti were from the Sahel, al-Shinqiti evidently had experience in the region and was operating there.

The Archivist

Al-Shinqiti's presence in the Sahel was also evidenced by his role in archiving AQIM correspondence with Boko Haram. In 2010, for example, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau wrote to AQIM's Sahel-based Tariq ibn Ziyad brigade commander, Abu Zeid, thanking him for AQIM's generosity in providing approximately \$215,000 (200,000 euros) and training to Boko Haram members ([Al-Andalus](#), April 2017).

Abu Zeid and AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel also exchanged back-and-forth letters in August and December 2009, with Abu Zeid's correspondence explaining the visit to the Sahel by Boko Haram members, including Khalid al-Barnawi, where they requested support from AQIM before waging jihad in Nigeria. Droukdel's correspondence promised media, financial, weapons, and training support to Boko Haram. Further, before Khalid al-Barnawi formed the breakaway faction Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru), which separated from Boko Haram in January 2012, he wrote to another Sahel-based Mauritanian AQIM commander, Abdullah al-Shinqiti, explaining the reasons why coexistence with Abubakar Shekau was impossible. This resulted in Abu al-Hassan Rasheed al-Bulaydi and another Algerian AQIM sharia judge approving Ansaru's separation from Boko Haram in late 2011 ([Al-Andalus](#), April 2017).

All of this correspondence passed through Abu Numan Qutayba al-Shinqiti at one point. In 2017, AQIM's al-Andalus media agency published excerpts of those correspondence with al-Shinqiti's interspersed narration, which provided context and extra details about those correspondence. Al-Shinqiti claimed he had been in southwestern Mali's Wagadou Forest from 2009 to 2011, which was consistent with his involvement in the Lazarevic hostage exchange and archiving these letters about Boko Haram's training in the Sahel. Al-Shinqiti also wrote in his narration that he had learned that 20 "Nigerian brothers" participated in AQIM's raid on Mauritanian troops in Hassi Sidi, Mali in September 2010, which was near Wagadou Forest, and that the spoils from that raid were rendered to Nigeria. He further mentioned a rarely known piece of information about Nigerians having joined AQIM's predecessor, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), as early as 1994 ([Al-Andalus](#), April 2017; [Al-Andalus](#), September 22, 2010).

The Mediator

The strategic reasoning for AQIM publishing the aforementioned, originally secret correspondence was that, in 2017, AQIM's rivalry with Islamic State was intensifying. The correspondence demonstrated that AQIM had disapproved of Boko Haram's—and specifically Abubakar Shekau's—excessive use of *takfir* (excommunication) against fellow Muslims. More broadly, this also supported AQIM's narratives against Islamic State's similar employment of excessive *takfir*.

Al-Shinqiti has continued supporting AQIM's counter-Islamic State messaging. Since at least January 2020, for example, AQIM's Sahel-based sub-affiliate, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), began clashing with Islamic State's affiliate in the Sahel, known as Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) ([Nordsudjournal.com](#), April 6). Moreover, there were reports of JNIM members defecting to ISGS ([Timbuktu-institute.org](#), January 20). In the midst of these challenges, al-Shinqiti published two treatises in early 2020 ([Al-Zallaqa](#), February 20).

The first one was called "Responding to Suspicions You Do Not Apply Sharia," which attempted to justify JNIM's more cautious approach to implementing sharia in comparison to Islamic State. This resembled Abdelmalek Droukdel's advice in 2012 to jihadists who controlled territory in northern Mali. He advised the jihadists to gradually introduce sharia to local populations to win their support. However, this has left AQIM vulnerable to Islamic State accusations of abandoning sharia ([Internal Letter](#), October 3, 2012). The second treatise, "Year of the Group," reflected al-Shinqiti's openness to potential reconciliation with Islamic State, or at least an attempt to not fight the group and instead work toward mutual goals of, for example, combatting the Malian army and its French backers. This indicated that, like al-

Shinqiti's contribution to publishing the AQIM correspondence with Boko Haram to challenge Islamic State's ideology, he was again doing the same, albeit with a subtle olive branch to the rival organization.

Conclusion

Abu Numan Qutayba al-Shinqiti represents a new generation of Mauritanian theologians that may replace Algerian theologians in AQIM, who are aging and increasingly distanced from the main battlefields in the Sahel. While al-Shinqiti does not appear to have taken on combat roles, his theological contributions to AQIM and, more recently, JNIM are supplemented by archiving key documents, taking part in hostage exchanges and counter-messaging Islamic State. He thus appears set to become one of AQIM's and JNIM's key public figures in the future, especially if JNIM's rivalry with ISGS continues to show signs of escalation.

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Notes

[1] Shinqiti is a Mauritanian town with an Islamic scholarly tradition and "al-Shinqiti" is a surname typically appended to Mauritanian jihadists even if they are not from Shinqiti.

An Update on Mokhtar Belmokhtar: Is the One-Eyed Jihadist Still Alive?

Jemimah Hudson

Who is Mokhtar Belmokhtar?

Mokhtar Belmokhtar is an Algerian national who fought in the country's 1990s civil conflict and later became a commander in al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)'s southern branch. He was given the moniker "Mr. Marlboro" on account of his role in smuggling goods (namely cigarettes) in the region, providing AQIM with significant revenue. Belmokhtar has also been called "the one-eyed Nelson" after losing an eye while fighting Russian forces during the Soviet Union's 1979-88 occupation of Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, he developed direct connections with a number of jihadists who went on to become senior figures in al-Qaeda. This likely in part explains his fractious relationship with the leadership of AQIM, who he believed had accorded him insufficient respect. Belmokhtar rejected their authority on several occasions, and in December 2012 left to form the al-Mulathameen Brigade ("Those who Sign with Blood" Brigade).

Belmokhtar's aggressive style and desire to prove his jihadist credentials to AQIM's leadership prompted him to orchestrate several high-profile attacks against Western interests across the region. Indeed, the al-Mulathameen Brigade rose to prominence when it carried out an attack in January 2013 on Algeria's Ain Amenas gas facility, during which at least 37 hostages were killed ([Echorouk](#), July 21, 2013). In August 2013, the al-Mulathameen Brigade merged with another AQIM breakaway group—the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA)—to create a new group, al-Murabitun. However, Belmokhtar continued to

recognize the authority of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and consequently conducted joint operations with AQIM elements in Mali and elsewhere, despite his official break from the group.

Belmokhtar was designated an al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist by both the United States and the UN in 2003, but it was not until 2013 that the U.S. State Department similarly designated al-Mulathameen Brigade and al-Murabitun.

Belmokhtar has been reported dead a number of times over the years, including a report that he was killed in Chad in 2013. However, just two months later, Belmokhtar claimed responsibility for two suicide truck bomb attacks on a French-owned uranium mine in Arlit, Niger, and a military base 150 miles away in Agadez ([Al-Jazeera](#), May 24, 2013). Later, in 2015, the Libyan government announced that a U.S. airstrike had killed Belmokhtar. U.S. officials confirmed the airstrike and that Belmokhtar had been a target, but were unable to confirm that he was killed ([Al-Monitor](#), June, 2015). In November 2016, Belmokhtar was targeted in a French airstrike in southern Libya, based on intelligence from the United States ([Middle East Eye](#), December 15, 2016). However, U.S. officials were again unable to confirm Belmokhtar's death.

Belmokhtar and al-Murabitun's Activities since 2016

Belmokhtar does not appear to have issued any public statements since 2015, fueling speculation that he had been killed in the French airstrike in 2016. However, Algerian intelligence services, working in collaboration with counterparts in Niger, suggested to local media in 2016 that Belmokhtar had successfully escaped, although with serious injuries ([Middle East Eye](#), December 15, 2016). The same month, a woman described as a wife of Belmokhtar was arrested in Libya

where she gave birth to his child, according to authorities in eastern Libya. The woman—a Tunisian national—was seized on her way to Derna and reportedly said that Belmokhtar was alive and residing in southern Libya ([Middle East Eye](#), November 23, 2016).

Moreover, a number of significant attacks linked to al-Murabitun have taken place since 2016, suggesting that the group has not suffered any operational setbacks that might be expected following the death of its leader. Such attacks suggest that the group has maintained both the capacity and intent to carry out significant violence. In January 2017, for instance, AQIM claimed responsibility for a large-scale attack in Gao, northern Mali, killing 77 people and injuring dozens more ([Al-Jazeera](#), January 8, 2017). A subsequent statement by AQIM said that the bombing was "punishment for Mali's cooperation with France" and attributed the attack specifically to its affiliate al-Murabitun. The statement did not include any mention of Belmokhtar's death.

Weeks after the Gao attack, al-Murabitun formed the wider jihadist alliance Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen (JNIM) with several other smaller regional groups, including the Islamist Tuareg organization Ansar al-Dine, AQIM's Sahara division, and the Katiba Macina Liberation Front of Ansar al-Dine. This new alliance was to be led by Iyad ag Ghali, the historical leader of Ansar al-Dine. The newly-formed group subsequently carried out and claimed a number of attacks, including a May 2017 assault on the headquarters of a UN peacekeeping force in the northern Mali city of Timbuktu, which resulted in the death of one peacekeeper ([AllAfrica](#), May 3, 2017). JNIM's longstanding links to local tribes and communities have since allowed it to consolidate its position as the dominant jihadist group in Mali.

In October 2017, a criminal court in Oran, Algeria, sentenced Belmokhtar to death in absentia after finding him guilty of forming and leading a terrorist organization (AQIM) and being in possession of, trading in and marketing weapons and ammunition. Belmokhtar had been tried and sentenced to death in 2012, along with nine other individuals. That case dated back to April 2011 over a plan to kidnap foreigners who were members of the construction team for Oran's tramway ([Middle East Monitor](#), October 16, 2017). The 2017 sentence against Belmokhtar suggests that authorities believed him to be alive and operational at this time.

More recently, in June 2018, the London-based Saudi magazine *al-Majalaa* suggested that reports of Belmokhtar's death could be false. The report, which cited correspondence with Libyan and Algerian intelligence services, stated that Belmokhtar was operating in the Sahel, in the largely ungoverned spaces between Chad, Niger, and Mali. A source in the Algerian intelligence services said they could not confirm whether Belmokhtar is alive or dead, adding that if he had been killed the news would likely have spread among tribes in the region ([Al-Majalaa](#), June 8, 2018).

Conclusion

Reports of Belmokhtar's death seem, on balance, most likely false or exaggerated. However, his relatively low profile since 2016 despite the high tempo of activities by al-Murabitun, AQIM and JNIM suggests that he has taken on a less prominent leadership role, possibly as a result of serious injury or internal disagreements over ideology and strategy. Indeed, reports from 2017 suggest that Belmokhtar may have been dismissed by al-Murabitun's council of elders in favor of Abderrahmane al-Sanhaji, a younger jihadist who is also an Algerian national ([Middle East Eye](#), May 9, 2017).

Meanwhile, in November 2019, the United States imposed sanctions on senior JNIM leader Amadou Kouffa, days after France's Minister for the Armed Forces said French troops had killed another JNIM leader, Ali Maychou, in Mali in October of that year, reflecting the growing threat the group poses in the region. In Algeria, the security forces' capabilities will continue to significantly limit the ability of AQIM and al-Murabitun militants to carry out attacks, and they will likely focus on conducting kidnappings in the more remote border areas in the southern part of the country. Militants will have more success in conducting attacks in Mali, Niger and Libya given the permissive security environments. JNIM remains the most significant regional jihadist group, and will continue to pose the greater threat to targets in more central areas and cities such as Gao and the capital, Bamako. JNIM militants will also continue to prioritize attacks on military convoys and bases, especially those hosting foreign troops as part of the G5 Sahel mission.

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Decoding Ustadh Usama Mahmoud—The Shadowy and Uncrowned Leader of AQIS

Animesh Roul

Following the death of al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent's (AQIS) founding leader Asim Umar and several of his associates in September 2019 in Afghanistan, it was believed that the youngest franchise of the international terrorist organization would be in disarray. However, the jihadist franchise seems to have grown in strength, at least in its virtual jihad and dawa (proselytizing) campaigns. In the months following Umar's death, the long-serving scholar spokesman, Ustadh Usama Mahmoud (a.k.a. Osama Mahmood), has risen to prominence in AQIS. A Pakistani-born Islamic cleric and teacher, Usama Mahmood is believed to have replaced the slain Asim Umar (a.k.a. Sanaul Haq) as the leader of AQIS. Although Mahmood has been serving as AQIS's spokesperson since 2014, he has been referred to as the al-Qaeda franchise's central leader in recent press releases.

Like Asim Umar and other jihadist scholars and functionaries of al-Qaeda, the identity and whereabouts of Usama Mahmood has been guarded by the organization's media and propaganda units. Little background information about him exists in open sources, or in al-Qaeda's own writings. Even though he is from the Pakistani capital Islamabad, as per media reports, and regularly criticizes the government, Mahmood does not seem to be reported on often. Surprisingly, the country's media and its powerful intelligence agencies often describes AQIS as a "defunct" organization. Barred from reproducing Mahmood's statements and press releases, Pakistan media once reported his death in April 2017. Reports at that time in the Urdu media largely focused on AQIS leader Asim

Umar's erroneous statement about Usama Mahmood's death (he was also called Osama Ibrahim in the AQIS communique). He was reportedly killed during a raid by U.S. forces in Zabul province in Afghanistan in September 2016, on the eve of Eid-ul-Adha ([Daily Pakistan](#) [Urdu], April 28, 2017; [Geo TV Urdu](#), April 27, 2017). No further investigations were undertaken when his name again surfaced in AQIS propaganda.

Information gleaned through audio-visual materials comprising press releases, lectures, writings, and speeches on jihad and dawa shed much light on Usama Mahmood's role as a guiding voice of al-Qaeda's brand in the region. He is one of the core founding members of AQIS and has been serving as its spokesperson since the organization was formed in September 2014. After the death of AQIS Deputy Chief Ustad Ahmed Farooq in January 2015, Usama Mahmood was elevated to the rank of deputy, concurrently overseeing Urdu language propaganda affairs for al-Qaeda. His role within AQIS is primarily known through statements and audio-visual releases from the al-Sahab (Subcontinent) media foundation and the online portals of the group such as "Matboaat-e-jihad," "Nawa-i-Afghan jihad" or the latest – "Nawa-i-Gahazwa-e-Hind." He has also shared several messages through audio-visual publishing platforms such as Islami Dunya and social media channels such as Twitter and Telegram ([Islami Dunya](#), July 10, 2017).

The United States, South Asia, and Beyond

Like most al-Qaeda leaders and functionaries, Usama Mahmood always considered the United States as the primary enemy, along with the alliance of "Crusaders, Zionists [Israel and Western countries], Mulhids [apostates], polytheists, and secularists [e.g. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh]." At various times, through

statements and interviews, Usama Mahmoud, who is fluent in Urdu, has pointed to Kashmir as a focal point of the ongoing jihad. In one of his earlier statements, released in June 16, 2016, he compared the United States with the Egyptian Pharaoh for its supposedly oppressive nature. He said that “humiliation is destined for the Pharaoh [the US] and its slave soldiers; while Islam's victory is manifest destiny.” [1] However, in one such audio message, titled “What do we (AQIS) want to achieve?”, Usama Mehmood charted the immediate geographical ambition of his group beyond anti-U.S. and Israeli sentiments, saying that AQIS’s purpose was to defend the Muslim populace of “Pakistan, Kashmir, India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar” from atrocity and oppression.

Soon after Asim Umar’s death in September 2019, Usama Mahmoud swiftly took the reins of AQIS, urging militants in the region to support Muslims in Kashmir by carrying out attacks against India. He asked them to follow in the footsteps of the Taliban and their Islamic Emirate model to reinvigorate the ongoing Islamist campaign. Like al-Qaeda’s central leadership, Usama Mahmoud declared his allegiance to the Taliban and its supreme leaders, maintaining AQIS’s loyalty towards the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

In an audio-visual message titled “The Kashmir: The Lion Shall Rise up Now,” released in October 2019, Mahmoud, along with al-Zawahiri, urged Indian and Pakistani Muslims to join the jihad against the supposed atrocities of democratic governments. He specifically highlighted the prevailing situation in Kashmir and the August 2019 abrogation of Article 370 in the Indian constitution, which gave the special status to the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. Questioning the idea of democracy as the “charm of the powerful,” Mahmoud called for Muslims to take up arms and disobey government-imposed curfews and blockades. [2]

In that same message, he vehemently condemned Pakistan’s hand in facilitating India’s alleged atrocities against Kashmiri Muslims. He blamed Pakistan’s political and military elites for their “selfishness, hypocrisy, and betrayal” that caused the sufferings of the Muslims of Kashmir. He basically condemned the Pakistani establishment for not supporting Kashmiri-centric militant movements. Mahmoud compared Pakistan with Middle Eastern nations for not supporting the Palestinian cause and other large jihadist movements. Usama Mahmoud reiterated al-Qaeda’s focus on liberating oppressed Muslims “from Kashmir and Turkestan to Palestine and Syria.” He maintains that the Pakistani army is an obstacle for AQIS’ jihad and martyrdom in the region. His views on Kashmir were largely in tandem with al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri’s calls to launch attacks against India and the Pakistani army.

In June 2019, Usama Mahmoud paid tribute to the AQIS-linked Kashmir militant leader Zakir Musa. Mahmoud said that the heart-breaking news of Zakir Musa’s death has “filled the hearts of the Mujahideen here in Afghanistan.” The tribute proved to a certain extent that AQIS was located in Afghanistan rather than Pakistan’s tribal areas, which is often suspected to be a safe haven for al-Qaeda and Taliban fugitives ([The Kashmir Walla](#), June 7, 2019). This audio message and subsequent Kashmir-centric releases from Usama Mahmoud signaled AQIS’s interests in energizing the stifled Kashmir jihad. [3]

On January 23, Osama Mahmoud looked beyond Kashmir, urging Muslims in India to wage jihad against government “oppressors.” In this 27-minute audio-visual presentation titled “Message of love and brotherhood in the service of Muslims of India,” he cited several incidents often exploited for propaganda purposes within

the jihadist community to raise anti-Indian sentiments. The oft-repeated events include the 2002 Gujarat communal riots, the recent citizenship law and the Indian Supreme Court's recent order to build a Hindu temple on the site of a demolished mosque. Mahmoud used these events to incite Muslims to wage jihad and fight back right-wing aggressions. He went a step further, comparing the situation of Indian Muslims to that of the Rohingya in Myanmar's Rakhine State. He compared their relative lack of armed resistance. In this message, Usama Mahmoud charted a five-point plan to protect and empower Muslims in India, exhorting them to fight back against Hindu "aggressors and wage jihad" ([Matboaate jihad](#), January 23).

Striving for Sharia in Pakistan

On several occasions in the past, Usama Mahmoud used his perch as AQIS's second-in-command and spokesperson to speak out against Pakistan. Being of Pakistani origin, Usama Mahmoud never hesitated to show his support for Islamic rule in his home country. In this regard, a statement he released on August 14, 2018, ironically coinciding with Pakistan's Independence Day celebrations, remains a guiding indicator for AQIS's larger goals. The statement, titled "Pakistan Is Ours" and released on various online platforms and social media channels, questioned the real identity of Pakistan. In chaste Urdu primarily aimed at Muslims in India and Pakistan, Usama Mahmoud attempted to answer several questions, such as: "Who should be the real custodian of Pakistan; who is destroying the country; and the foremost, to whom does Pakistan belong?" ([Memri Special Dispatch](#), August 17, 2018) Mahmoud's criticism of Pakistan's politicians and military remains constant and often vociferous. He calls the Pakistani military a "slave of the U.S." and an instrumental force behind the prevalent conflicts and atrocities against real and practicing

Muslims in the country. He argued that Pakistan belongs to Islamic scholars and jihadist fighters who have been sacrificing their lives for the real Pakistan based on Islamic Sharia laws. Again, between November 9 and November 20, 2018, in an audio-visual message series, Usama Mahmoud urged all religious-political parties to reject democracy in Pakistan. He also blamed Pakistan's Islamist parties for deviating from the path of jihad and dawa, and falling prey to electoral politics. He also accused the Pakistani army and press of working with anti-Islamic forces in Pakistan.

In these messages, as on previous occasions, Usama Mahmoud underscored that democracy is a threat to Islam and something that religious scholars in Pakistan wrongly perceive as a means to establish Islamic Sharia rule. He argued that those Islamists presently working under the government's arrangements can never bring change to Pakistan or ever implement Sharia law in the country. Chiding Pakistani Islamist political and religious parties for their failure to capitalize on their electoral success in 2002, Usama Mahmoud underscored their failure to do anything for Islam during the five years that they were part of the government machinery. He described how, over those five years, U.S. and Pakistani forces launched campaigns against "the Mujahidin" and civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas without any resistance from Islamist parties. He concluded by calling for people to take up arms and to wage jihad either "physically" or by using "pen and words" ([Matboaate jihad](#), November 20, 2018).

Conclusion

Core al-Qaeda's Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri never officially declared or designated Usama Mahmoud as the successor to the slain AQIS leader, Asim Umar. But signs of Usama Mahmoud's authority have been visible throughout AQIS' propaganda campaign since

late 2019. His constant focus on “anti-India and anti-Pakistan” propaganda certainly bolsters a new optimism among AQIS’ rank-and-file members in the region. His persistent diatribes against the Pakistani army’s atrocities and corruption might have helped AQIS build on popular sympathy and support from religious groups in the region. However, it would be an uphill task for Usama Mahmoud to lead AQIS from the front while evading scrutiny in Pakistan. Now that this al-Qaeda affiliate is reportedly shifting its violent jihad campaign from Afghanistan to Kashmir following the recent U.S.-Taliban agreement, it would be a challenge for Usama Mahmoud to remain safe, relevant, and effective beyond Afghanistan’s safe havens (see [TM](#), April 17).

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Notes

[1] “Stand Up to Today's Pharaoh America,” June 16, 2016, retrieved from https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/18597/OMM20160616_2.pdf?sequence=1

[2] “The Kashmir: The Lion Shall Rise up Now,” <https://matboaatejihad.net/?p=1230>.

[3] “Zakir Musa: A Determination, A Movement (Audio),” June 06, 2019. Retrieved from <https://matboaatejihad.net/?p=2018>

Abu Alaa al-Walai: Tehran’s Loyal Iraqi Militiaman

Rami Jameel

“All Americans in Iraq will be hostages if a war broke out between the U.S. and Iran. Because we will stand with Iran, period,” said Abu Ala’a al-Walai, the prominent Iraqi Shia militia leader, in a TV interview last August ([Alalam TV](#), August 28, 2019; [YouTube](#), August 29, 2019).

This obvious threat came months before tensions between the United States and the Iraqi Shia militias would escalate due to the Shia militias attacking the U.S. embassy in Baghdad in late December 2019 and early January 2020. The attack was followed by the U.S. killing of Iranian General Qassim Soleimani as he arrived in an unannounced visit to Baghdad on January 3. Soleimani was the commander of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps - Quds Force (IRGC-QF) and the main leader of the Shia militia movement in the Middle East. He was killed alongside Jamal Ja’afar al-Ibrahim (better known as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis), the deputy leader of the Iraqi al-Hashd al-Sha’abi (Popular Mobilization Units-PMU) ([Al Arabiya](#), January 3).

Al-Walai is one of the militia leaders who was close to Soleimani. His August threat has not been fulfilled, but it was an early indication on where things were headed. Soon after the death of Soleimani, General Esmail Ghaani was appointed as his successor. Al-Walai was one of the first Iraqi Shia militia leaders to meet him a few days after his appointment ([Arabi21](#), January 11).

Al-Walai is the leader of the Kataib Sayyed al-Shuhada’a (KSS) militia. It is one of the biggest Shia militias in Iraq, believed to include about 5,000 fighters. KSS was one of the militias that fought in the campaign against the Sunni

extremist group Islamic State (IS) between 2014 and 2017. Much like other Shia militias, it remained deployed in several Sunni populated areas in western and northern Iraq. KSS is also deployed in Syria where it has been fighting, alongside other Shia militias, on the side of the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad since 2012.

Prisons and Insurgencies

Abu Ala'a al-Walai's real name is Hashim Bnayan al-Saraji. He is believed to be in his late forties. He started his political life as a member of the Islamic Dawa party, which was the parent organization of 20th century Shia Islamist organizations in Arab countries. Al-Walai claims that as a Dawa member, he was involved in opposition activities against the government of the former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in the 1990s, which led to his arrest. He claims that he was sentenced to death, but the sentence was commuted to life in prison. After 10 years imprisonment, he was released as part of the comprehensive amnesty issued by Hussein in late 2002 ([YouTube](#), July 6, 2017).

After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, al-Walai joined the Shia insurgency against the U.S.-led coalition forces. The Shia insurgency was dominated by the Mahdi Army of Moqtada al-Sadr. Al-Walai was a member of other Shia militias that had stronger ties to Iran, which the United States referred to as the Special Groups. Although those groups became active in 2006, al-Walai and a few other Shia militia leaders claim that they actually started attacking coalition forces in 2003 ([Noon Post](#), January 12, 2015).

Those groups eventually evolved into two large organizations: Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), led by Sheikh Qais al-Khazali, and Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) (see [MLM](#), February 4). Al-Walae was a member of the latter. As a result of his active

role as a leader within the ranks of KH, al-Walai was arrested by U.S. forces. He claims that he was imprisoned for three years and was the last Iraqi prisoner released by U.S. forces during their withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011 ([Noon Post](#), January 12, 2015).

Wars Beyond Borders

As the revolution in Syria turned into a civil war, Iraqi Shia militias joined the fight alongside the Syrian regime. These groups claimed to be defending Shia holy sites in Syria against the extremist Sunni Islamists of IS and other opposition groups. In order to have greater flexibility and maneuverability, Shia militias began to split and grow at the same time. By the time he was released from prison in 2012, al-Walai seemed to have acquired enough credentials to start his own militia. He left (KH) on good terms to found KSS. The main Shia holy site in Syria is the Shrine of al-Saida Zainab, located on the southern outskirts of Damascus. First, Iraqi Shia militias were reported to have been deployed there and fought against predominantly Sunni opposition groups. Shortly thereafter, it turned out that the Iraqi militias were deployed way beyond that part of Syria, to various fronts across the country. Al-Walai once stated proudly that part of his militia was stationed in southern Syria, not far from the Israeli borders ([YouTube](#), September 10, 2019).

In another early move that illustrated the senior position they occupied within the Shia militia movement, al-Walai's group was one of the first Iraqi militias to mobilize against IS in Iraq. While most of the militias moved after the major IS advances of June 2014, when the group overran Mosul, Tikrit, and other predominantly Sunni cities, KSS had actually mobilized months earlier ([Almirbad](#), September 11, 2014).

Al-Walai stated that he met with then-Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki after the fall of

Fallujah (only 50 miles west of Baghdad) in January 2014 and joined other militias in a plan to secure areas around Baghdad from the dire threat of IS. Although IS threatened to invade Baghdad and the predominantly Shia areas of southern Iraq after it made significantly larger advances six months later, the group remained in the Sunni areas of the country ([Almirbad](#), September 11, 2014).

No major battle happened near Baghdad, but Shia militias organized and consolidated the defenses as large army and police units either collapsed or suffered substantial losses in moral. But the militias' practices drew criticism from human rights groups due to the harsh measures they used against civilians in Sunni areas around Baghdad that were perceived as IS-friendly ([HRW](#), August 4, 2014).

When the PMU was formed in June 2014 as an umbrella organization of the Shia militias, al-Walai and his group joined. KSS became involved in the fighting against IS on many fronts. Al-Walai himself was injured during the fight near Tikrit in 2015, but he recovered quickly. The PMU used the *fatwa* issued by Iraq's most senior Shia cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani after the fall of Mosul and Tikrit in June 2014 to gain legitimacy and attract new recruits. Although the *fatwa* called upon Iraqis to join the security forces, the PMU was the body that organized new recruits. New armed groups were formed within the PMU, but the militias who benefited the most were those who were already established and had solid support from Iran, like al-Walai's KSS. Despite being part of the PMU, al-Walai and his KSS clearly state that they are part of the "Islamic Resistance," a term that refers to their ideological commitment to fight, under the leadership of Iran and its supreme leader, against the United States, Israel, and any other perceived enemy. [1]

The Attack on the Embassy

As the Iraqi militias were preparing to launch the attack on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, al-Walai was again the first to compare the move with the siege of the U.S. embassy in Tehran 40 years earlier ([Baghdad Today](#), December 31).

While the attack took place, it did not develop into the hostage taking that al-Walai threatened months earlier. As the United States killed Soleimani and al-Muhandis, al-Walai turned to support efforts aimed at expelling the U.S. and foreign forces from Iraq. U.S. and other anti-IS coalition forces were deployed to Iraq in 2014 to help its government face IS. Yet al-Walai and other Shia militia leaders have always accused the U.S. of supporting IS. They use their official platforms and airtime in the media to spread such conspiracy theories ([Arabi21](#), October 5, 2015).

Supporting the Prime Minister

Al-Walai is also a prominent supporter of Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi, who rose to the position in 2018 and resigned on November 29, 2019. However, he remains PM in a caretaker role at the time of this writing. When a widespread uprising broke out last October calling for genuine reform and an end to the sectarian governing system and corruption, al-Walai and his co-militia leaders came out against it. While militias other than KSS took a larger role in the bloody crackdown against the protesters, al-Walai was tipped to be one of the masterminds behind the repression campaign ([Al-Ain](#), January 23). For his pro-PMU policies throughout his time in office, Abdul-Mahdi was hailed by al-Walai as a blessing to the Iraqi people ([Buratha News](#), February 22).

When Adnan al-Zurfi, a pro-U.S. Shia politician, was designated as prime minister, al-Walai and other Shia militias issued a joint statement

pledging to oppose his appointment ([Nas News](#), April 4). Al-Zurfi failed to form a government. At the time of this writing, the new candidate for prime minister is Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who is perceived as better able to strike a balance between the United States and Iran. He is currently trying to form a coalition government. Although al-Walai's organization has only one seat in the 328 member Iraqi parliament, he has a significantly larger influence on the process of selecting and supporting any prime minister through his position in the Shia militia movement and his links to Iran. Events in the past showed that al-Walai is frequently ahead of events, therefore it will be useful to monitor what he signals in the future.

Conclusion

The PMU's militias can be divided into those loyal to Iran and those which are more Iraqi-oriented and have links to Sistani. The first group is referred to as al-Hashd al-Walai (the Loyal Mobilization Units). Al-Walai, which means loyal in Arabic, is a reference to these militias' loyalty to Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei. More than anyone else, al-Walai represents this group. In fact, he started using the name al-Walai by the time that the division within the organization emerged, showing how he embraced that description and identity. He was never ashamed of his militia's links to Iran and the fact that it followed the Iranian supreme leader's teachings.

It is important to understand here that those militias' loyalty to Khamenei does not necessarily mean that they are against Sistani. They frequently show their respect to Sistani and, as mentioned previously, use his *fatwa* as a source of legitimacy. Yet while they respect Sistani, they still balance his influence with their links to Khamenei and Iran accordingly. Iran and Khamenei have always respected Sistani and acknowledge his religious and social authority in

Iraq. Those terms of the relationship were facilitated by Sistani's tendency not to become involved in politics. The coexistence between the two influences will be tested in the coming days. On April 23, four PMU militias that were formed by clerics close to Sistani announced their withdrawal from the PMU. Reports suggest that the action was due to new leaders who were elevated to higher responsibility after the killing of al-Muhandis ([Al Jazeera](#), April 23). Al-Walai's position in any possible clash of loyalties will be, as his name suggests, beyond any doubt.

Meanwhile, the Shia militias seemed to have launched a new anti-U.S. strategy. Al-Walai announced his unequivocal support for the attack on the U.S. section of the Camp Taji base north of Baghdad, where two U.S. and one UK soldiers were killed ([Rudaw](#), March 12). However, he did not claim responsibility for the attack. An unknown group called Usbat al-Thaereen (The League of Revolutionaries) took credit ([Aliraqnet](#), March 19).

Pursuant to their goal of driving the United States out of Iraq, the Shia militias need groups that have no announced links to politics in order to not embarrass the Shia-led Iraqi government, which is under pressure from Washington. A new militia with an unknown leadership will also make it harder for the United States to target certain figures for retribution or deterrence measures. But those new militias are believed to be a result of a reorganization of existing Shia militias. And men like al-Walai will always play a central role in confronting the United States in Iraq.

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Notes

[1] See the KSS official website <http://saidshuhada.com/index.php/iraq/index.1.html> also see al-Walai's talks and statements in the interviews we referred to in this article for example.

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