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Mullah Yaqoob: Taliban Founder's Son Becomes Military Head in Political Reshuffling

John Foulkes

On May 7, reports emerged confirming Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob's appointment as head of the military commission of the Taliban in a political reshuffling that could help unify the insurgent group's leadership in the lead up to negotiations with the Afghan government ([The News](#), May 10). Yaqoob is the eldest son of Taliban founder Mullah Mohammad Omar, who died in April 2013.

Yaqoob was reportedly born in 1990 and educated in several religious schools in Karachi, Pakistan ([Arab News](#), May 10; [Afghan Bios](#), May 30). Like his father, he is an ethnic Pashtun from the Hotak tribe, which is a branch of the larger Ghilzai tribe. Yaqoob first rose to a leadership position within the Taliban in April 2016, when he was placed in charge of military operations in 15 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. At the same time, he was inducted into the *Rahbari Shura*—the

top Taliban decision-making council better known as the Quetta Shura—alongside his uncle and Omar's brother, Mullah Abdul Manan ([Pakistan Today](#), April 5, 2016). This early promotion of Yaqoob was seen at the time as an attempt by then-Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour to unite various factions of the militant group under his contentious leadership. Akhtar's rise to power following the announcement of Omar's death in 2015 was disputed by several prominent leaders of the Taliban, leading to internal fighting.

Following the death of Mansour by a U.S. drone strike in May 2016, Haibatullah Akhundzada was elected as supreme commander of the Taliban. In the same statement announcing the decision, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said Yaqoob would be elevated to deputy leadership position of the organization, under Akhundzada ([Dawn](#), June 9, 2016). Yaqoob was allegedly put forward as a potential successor to Mansour, due to his lineage, but reportedly turned down the offer due to his youth and inexperience ([Pakistan Today](#), April 5, 2016). His promotion to military chief does not mean he will lose his position as deputy leader of the

Taliban. Yaqoob will reportedly maintain this position while overseeing military operations ([Khaama Press News Agency](#), May 10).

Yaqoob's promotion to military chief has been seen as a check on the power of his predecessor, Ibrahim Sardar ([The News](#), May 10). Sardar is a battle-hardened commander and longtime member of the Taliban, who was considered a close ally of Mansour before the former Taliban leader's death. The position as head of the military commission was technically vacant for several years, but Sardar acted as its *de facto* commander. He will remain in leadership as a deputy to Yaqoob, alongside Abdul Qayyum Zakir. The military commission is divided between southern and eastern zones. Sardar will now oversee operations in the southern zone, and Zakir—a former head of the commission and prior detainee of Guantanamo—will oversee the eastern, with both answering to Yaqoob.

According to journalist Abubakar Siddique, the editor of RFE/RL's Gandhara website and a specialist on Afghanistan and Pakistan, Yaqoob's appointment, "is a significant step to unite Taliban ranks so there are no spoilers when they negotiate with the Afghan government."

Siddique further notes that, "...the Taliban are keen on preserving some kind of continuity from [Mullah Omar], this is why his [Omar's] brother [Mullah Abdul Manan] is an important figure in the Doha office, and his son [Yaqoob] is rising through the military ranks." [1] According to the former director of Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security, Manan receives a monthly salary of approximately \$13,500 (50,000 Qatari riyals) a month while working for the Taliban office in Doha ([Twitter.com/rahmatullahn](#), May 23).

While Yaqoob's appointment is directly tied to both his father's exalted position within the organization and a bid by Akhundzada to unite the Taliban leadership before beginning negotiations with the Afghan government, Siddique notes that the group is unlikely to give up on their core belief of reestablishing the Islamic Emirate. According to Siddique, "...past analysis and expectations that the Taliban leadership changes or optimistic statements will lead to changes in their core beliefs or abandoning efforts to reestablish their government have proved wrong."

Indeed, Yaqoob's background and deep ties with the Taliban indicates that it is highly unlikely his rise in leadership will result in any substantive change in the group's policy. Since the U.S.-Taliban agreement was signed on February 29, the Taliban has committed over 4,500 attacks ([Al Jazeera](#), May 7). Despite this, Abdullah Abdullah—the briefly self-declared Afghan president whose recent political deal with President Ashraf Ghani placed him in charge of peace talks—said his team is ready to begin negotiating with the Taliban ([Al Jazeera](#), May 30).

The question facing Afghan policymakers now is if the Taliban, under Yaqoob's military leadership, will continue their aggressive campaign against Afghan forces as they have since signing an agreement with the United States; or if Akhundzada, buoyed by the lower risk of Ibrahim Sardar acting as a spoiler, will lower tensions, commit to confidence-building measures, and negotiate in earnest. A recent unilateral ceasefire by the Taliban over the Eid al-Fitr holiday is a positive sign, but the group still staged an attack on Afghan forces two days following its expiration on May 26 ([Al Jazeera](#), May 28). The Taliban will likely continue to target Afghan forces, in attacks directed by

Yaqoob, to gain additional leverage before negotiations begin.

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Notes

[1] Author's interview with Abubakar Siddique. Conducted by email on May 13 – 15.

Yemen's Wildcard General— An Updated Profile of Brigadier Tariq Saleh

Michael Horton

Tariq Saleh, the nephew of former Yemeni President Ali Abdulla Saleh, is a proverbial wild card in Yemen's interconnected wars. The former commander of Yemen's now defunct Presidential Guard controls one of the best organized and best armed militias in Yemen, known as the National Resistance Forces (NRF). The NRF control much of Yemen's Red Sea coast, from the port of Mocha to the outskirts of the port-city of Hodeidah. This region, known as the Tihama, is of great strategic importance due to its position between the highlands and the sea. The question is, where will Brigadier General Tariq Saleh lead the NRF as Yemen's internationally recognized government comes under further pressure?

Brigadier Saleh is nominally allied with Yemen's internationally recognized and Saudi-backed government-in-exile. This tenuous alliance was formed after Ali Abdullah Saleh switched sides, breaking away from the Houthis and allying himself with Saudi Arabia. Ali Abdullah Saleh was assassinated by the Houthis in December 2017. Following his uncle's assassination, Tariq Saleh managed to flee Sana'a and subsequently form the NRF with the stated aim of avenging his uncle's death and retaking the Yemeni capital ([The National](#), January 12, 2018). These goals led him to form a loose alliance with the Hadi government and its primary supporter, Saudi Arabia. However, at the same time, Tariq Saleh is a favored ally of the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Hedging his Bets

The government led by Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi has seen its already limited control and influence erode over the last year. Forces loyal to the Hadi government have steadily lost ground to the Houthis in the governorates of Marib and al-Jawf, while, at the same time, they are under pressure from Southern Transitional Council (STC) forces in southern governorates. Hadi-aligned forces have been largely evicted from their temporary capital of Aden by STC forces. The STC is battling Hadi's forces in the governorates of Abyan and Shabwa ([Arab News](#), May 18). The STC, whose leadership largely supports the recreation of an independent southern Yemen, announced that it intends to establish self-rule over the territory it occupies ([Middle East Monitor](#), May 6).

The STC's relationship with Tariq Saleh is ambiguous and this ambiguity has served the brigadier well over the last two years. The STC and the NRF have engaged in skirmishes over disputed territory and resources, but these have been limited. Saleh's forces, which number between 3,000 to 4,000, continue to rely on the UAE for most of their funding and supplies. Over the last two years competition between Saudi Arabia and the UAE for influence in Yemen has intensified.

Despite what is now open war between the Hadi government and the STC, Tariq Saleh and the NRF have remained on the sidelines. The NRF's reluctance to become involved in the conflict between the STC and the Hadi government is due to the influence of the UAE. It is also a shrewd strategy on the part of the brigadier. As a favored and trusted nephew of long-serving Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, Tariq Saleh had ample opportunities to learn from a master of Machiavellian tactics who possessed a

comprehensive and intuitive understanding of Yemen's tribal politics. While Tariq Saleh lacks his uncle's charisma, he has proved himself to be a capable commander who has managed to knit together an unlikely coalition of forces.

As the only senior member of the Saleh family active on the battlefields in Yemen, some of the allies and supporters of Ali Abdullah Saleh have rallied around Tariq Saleh. Many of these men are from Yemen's Republican Guard, which was the best trained military force in Yemen and functioned as the Saleh family's Praetorian Guard. It is these well-trained and capable officers and NCOs that make up the core of the NRF. These men ensure that the NRF, unlike almost all of the other non-Houthi forces in Yemen, maintains a clear and responsive chain of command.

Outside of his core force, Tariq Saleh has assembled a loose alliance of regional militias. Chief among these is the Tihama Resistance Force. This group was formed in response to the Houthis' takeover of the port city of Hodeidah in October 2014. The objective of the Tihama Resistance Force is, first and foremost, to defend the region from further incursions by the Houthis. The secondary objective is, at least for some members of its leadership, to create an independent Tihama. Most of the leadership knows that this is unlikely, though not without historical precedent, and consequently supports Saleh and the NRF in their efforts to thwart Houthi advances and their stated aim of reunifying Yemen.

Hard Choices

The reunification of Yemen, while still possible, is unlikely over the medium-term and even long-term. At best, Yemen may at some point be reunified under some kind of re-worked federal structure that grants a large degree of autonomy

to southern Yemen. No single power in Yemen has the capability to dominate the whole country. While the Houthis are the preeminent military force in Yemen, their politics will limit their ability to extend control much beyond the northwest highlands and parts of the Tihama. Despite claims made by the Hadi government and those forces allied with it, Houthi control of northwest Yemen will only be eroded by internal divisions among the Houthis, popular unrest, loss of tribal support, or some combination of these three. As the last five years demonstrate, the expenditure of billions of dollars by the UAE and Saudi Arabia and a devastating aerial campaign have failed to defeat or even substantially weaken the Houthis and their allies.

Tariq Saleh, like his uncle, is a political realist who must know that he faces hard choices in the near future. While the NRF is a relatively well-run and cohesive force—at least its core fighters are—it is no match for the Houthis on its own. Without money and supplies from the UAE, the NRF would be greatly weakened and the alliances it has formed with regional militias like the Tihama Resistance Force will likely disintegrate. Yet, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are determined to reduce their involvement and expenditures in Yemen, and were so even before the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic. The UAE, which withdrew almost all of its troops from Yemen in 2019, continues to fund its proxies, of which the NRF is one. However, this support will undoubtedly continue to be reduced as the UAE faces a severe economic crisis at home ([Middle East Eye](#), July 8, 2019). Saudi Arabia is already limiting its support for the Hadi government and its forces as it tries to extricate itself from Yemen. The reduction in outside support by Saudi Arabia and the UAE for their various proxies is already altering the political

landscape in Yemen. This is most evident in the fragility of the Hadi-aligned forces.

Over the coming months, Tariq Saleh will have to decide how he will use the NRF. So far, he has successfully charted a course between the STC and the Hadi-aligned forces while continuing to engage the Houthis in limited skirmishes. Reductions in aid from outside powers, the steady weakening of Hadi's forces, and an increasingly assertive STC will limit the options of Tariq Saleh and those of the NRF. If Hadi's forces are pushed out of Marib by the Houthis and out of the southern governorates by the STC, the Houthis and their allies will have more resources to devote to the frontlines in the Tihama. This will put pressure on the NRF, whose core troops are already thinly spread across much of the Tihama. Without steady infusions of money and supplies, NRF forces would likely be overrun by a concerted Houthi-led offensive. This is in no one's interest, apart from the Houthis, so it is likely that Saudi Arabia and the UAE will aid the NRF, albeit at much reduced levels. While the STC has relations with the Houthis, it is not in their interest to see the Houthis takeover parts of the Tihama. It is therefore likely that the STC would support the NRF by reinforcing vulnerable areas in the southern half of the Tihama.

Conclusion

As a talented commander and strategist, Tariq Saleh must see that his options are increasingly limited. Yet, the NRF could still play a significant, if ancillary role, in Yemen. It is the NRF that keeps the Houthis from taking the Tihama. Saleh will leverage this position to maintain at least some aid from the UAE and Saudi Arabia over the short-term. However, over the medium- and long-term, the brigadier and the NRF are likely to be little more than a

placeholder force whose strength and capabilities will diminish over time.

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Sultan Aziz Azam: Can the Propagandist Revive IS-K's Fortunes in Afghanistan?

Shan A. Zain

While Islamic State's (IS) so-called caliphate was crumbling in Syria, the group was gaining ground in Afghanistan. IS' self-styled "Khorasan Province," a.k.a. Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), seized swathes of land in the country, defying the setbacks for the group elsewhere. IS-K quickly became the most potent of all the IS branches, claiming regular attacks against high-profile targets in Afghanistan. A key figure behind IS-K's spectacular rise is Sultan Aziz Azam, a former journalist in Jalalabad who later became the spokesperson of the group and led its media operation. As the group's leaders avoid appearances while in hiding, Azam became a public face for IS-K. He successfully recruited new members through his rousing radio speeches and built a sophisticated media empire. His transformation from a popular local media professional to a ruthless jihadist propagandist—who even threatened his former colleagues—is synonymous with IS-K's success in Afghanistan. Azam built a media ecosystem for IS-K that was perhaps unmatched even by the well-established propaganda machine run by IS' jihadist rival, the Taliban. Despite IS-K's recent rout in its stronghold of eastern Nangarhar province, Azam survived and vowed to continue his mission to revive the group in Afghanistan.

The Journalist and the Writer

Sultan Aziz Azam (also spelt as Ezam) is a resident of the Barikab area of Bati Kot district of Nangarhar. He spent his early years with his family at the Aza Khel camp in Peshawar during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. He completed schooling in his hometown and later attended Nangarhar University ([Telegram](#),

August 26, 2019; [Islamic Theology of Counter-terrorism](#), December 27, 2018)

Before he joined IS in 2015, Azam worked for at least three local radio stations over the course of a decade, including Eslah Radio in the provincial capital Jalalabad. His name is still listed on the website of the radio as a financial and administrative manager ([Voice of America](#), December 25, 2015; [Eslah Radio](#) website).

He is a poet and writer and his work often appeared on social media platforms such as Facebook prior to his joining IS. According to his own account, Azam started writing while at the university. He has said that he aspired to live under an Islamic system and that he fulfilled his ambition of being a jihadist when he joined IS ([Telegram](#), August 26, 2019). Soon after joining the group, he encouraged others, including his former colleagues, to be part of the group and threatened to target them if they did not do so.

There is little information about his family, but Azam once claimed that his 13-year-old son was killed in a U.S. drone strike and that his second son, Omid, 12, would follow in his own footsteps after his death.

U.S. and Afghan officials declared Azam dead in a drone strike in Nangarhar in December 2018, but he later re-emerged in a purported audio message denying reports he had been killed. He admitted to being injured in the attack, but said he had recovered and was fit to carry on ([Ariana News](#), December 27, 2018).

The Afghan government had earlier, in February 2016, declared that Azam was killed in an airstrike. However, he reappeared five months later and spearheaded IS' media operation with more active participation ([Afghan Islamic Press](#), May 11, 2016).

Azam and Voice of the Caliphate

Azam has been functioning as IS-K's chief propagandist and spokesperson since its

founding. The role gave him more visibility than anyone else in the organization, including its regional leaders, who have traditionally kept a low profile.

His vast experience in broadcast journalism enabled him to effectively fulfil that role and build a propaganda machine that is unique and different from the other IS branches.

Building on his expertise in radio, in December 2015, he spearheaded the launch of IS' Seda-i-Khilafat (Voice of the Caliphate) FM radio broadcasts in parts of Nangarhar.

Azam successfully used the FM station, based in Bandar Valley in Achin district, to connect with young people and recruit members for IS in Afghanistan, where radio remains a popular medium ([Afghan Analysts Network](#), March 25, 2019).

The radio broadcasts proved effective for IS-K, and the group would occasionally use them to disseminate official messages, unlike IS' other branches, whose news and propaganda come out only through the organization's central media outlets. The radio broadcasts stood out and were sometimes uncharacteristic of communication from IS "provinces" elsewhere.

For example, in June 2018, Azam, via the Voice of the Caliphate, ordered the closure of all schools for girls in Nangarhar, threatening to target them otherwise. The warning was a deviation from official IS policy elsewhere, where the group has not been seen threatening schools ([Telegram](#), June 4, 2018).

Under Azam, the Voice of the Caliphate has amplified its content and reach. The radio broadcast, which started its operations with Pashto-language broadcasts, later offered programs in Uzbek, Dari, Arabic and Urdu. It also expanded its range of propaganda items from religious programs and news bulletins to regular interviews with fighters and local

residents, and reports about life under the caliphate.

The FM broadcasting was disrupted on several occasions due to attacks by Afghan and U.S. forces. However, IS quickly restored its operations, a fact that highlights its indispensable role in IS recruitment and propaganda dissemination in Afghanistan.

In its erroneous February 2016 announcement of Azam's death, the Afghan government also said it had destroyed the Voice of the Caliphate radio station. However, the broadcast returned three months later with Azam leading most of the programs ([Pajhwok News](#), February 2, 2016).

Similarly, it was widely reported that the radio station was destroyed and many militants killed following a bombing campaign in Nangarhar by the United States in April 2017. Four days later, however, the Voice of the Caliphate was back on air and Azam denied the death of IS fighters ([Pajhwok News](#), April 17, 2017).

Aside from his key role in Voice of the Caliphate, Azam has also taken the lead on running the Pashto-language version of IS' al-Bayan radio. In addition to his own propaganda speeches, he often translates and presents IS leadership messages, selected articles from IS' weekly newspaper al-Naba and stories about jihadists via al-Bayan. In February, he translated a key audio message from the new IS spokesperson Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, in which the jihadist leader insisted the group was far from defeated ([Telegram](#), February 2).

IS' Chief Recruiter in Afghanistan

Sultan Aziz Azam has been credited with recruiting IS members to carry out high-profile attacks in Afghanistan. He has written several books and articles narrating stories about jihadists in order to inspire people to join IS ranks. IS supporters often share excerpts and anecdotes from his books on the messaging app Telegram.

His major work is a multi-part book titled "Travelers of the Maze," which tells the purported stories of IS jihadists living in the Spin Ghar mountains, a highly mountainous and isolated terrain where IS had built its base and controlled several districts. The book highlights stories of IS-K jihadists, their migration to Afghanistan and the hardships they faced on the mountain. Recently, IS supporters launched a Pashto-language mobile app containing the first volume of the book ([Telegram](#), December 27, 2019).

Many educated youths have reportedly joined IS after being radicalized by the group's public messages. Students and professionals in Jalalabad have admitted that they were genuinely interested in IS' narrative of jihad after listening to the Voice of the Caliphate radio ([Afghanistan Analysts Network](#), March 9).

A key tactic adopted by Azam has been poaching disenchanting militants from the Taliban by repeatedly exposing the latter's perceived ideological fallacies. He has constantly accused the Taliban of desecrating jihad by siding with the Pakistani government, which IS considers an infidel body, and surrendering to the United States under the pretext of signing a peace deal.

The Man to Revive Islamic State?

IS will now be pinning its hopes on Azam and his media prowess in order to revive its Khorasan branch, which was once described as the crown jewel of the group's caliphate. And signs have begun to emerge that Azam has already embarked on this difficult mission.

Even before the controversy over the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's announcement in November 2019 that IS-K had been obliterated subsided, Azam warned in an audio message that the group was on course for a comeback. Admitting his group's setbacks without any qualms—something not expected from IS—he vowed to carry out deadly attacks, particularly in the capital Kabul.

In early March, IS carried out several deadly attacks in Kabul targeting politicians. More worryingly, its attacks in Kabul have been on the rise since then, a trend that has alarmed Afghan authorities and security experts.

IS may now be a shadow of its former self in Afghanistan, but its media operations have continued to thrive under Azam. IS-K and its supporters have been prolifically using social media platforms in order to amplify the group's jihadist propaganda as well as to reach out to potential recruits. It remains to be seen if such rhetoric and media can bring back IS-K's lost territory and lethality.

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Abdelhakim al-Sahrawi— First in Line to Lead Islamic State in Greater Sahara

Jacob Zenn

Since Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS)'s killing of four U.S. special forces members in October 2017 in northwestern Niger, the group has increasingly become defined by France and allied Sahelian governments as the “priority” regional threat for counter-terrorism operations (Diplomatie.gouv.fr, January 13). ISGS peaked in late 2019, when it began raiding military barracks in the Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso tri-border region and attacking civilians, especially Christians. Although the Western Saharan, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, is ISGS' leader, its most prominent public face—and perhaps most important member operationally—has been another Western Saharan: Abdelhakim al-Sahrawi. Although Abdelhakim first emerged as one of the “softer” jihadists, his recent activities demonstrate he has become more like a typical Islamic State hardliner.

MUJWA's Minister in Gao

Abdelhakim first emerged publicly on the jihadist scene in a landmark June 26, 2012 video from Gao, Mali. The video - which was produced by “Askia,” an unknown, but professionalized, media agency - featured Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) members rushing into Gao on sport-utility vehicles. They were calming an angry populace that was protesting against the secular Tuareg-led National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which had been administering Gao since early 2012 in a tacit alliance with MUJWA. [1]

Abdelhakim was one of the most visible MUJWA members speaking with protesters at around the 1:20 mark in the video. The protest proved to be a turning point because it resulted in the MNLA's ejection from Gao, MUJWA's takeover of Gao, and Abdelhakim's subsequent elevation to high-level MUJWA posts in the city. However, also notable in the protest video were Gao civilians chanting pro-jihadist slogans in a way that appeared not to be scripted or staged, but to reflect their actual positive sentiment toward MUJWA at the time.

Abdelhakim eventually announced MUJWA would implement *Sharia* punishments in Gao before Ramadan in 2012 ([Rfi.fr](#), August 10, 2012; [Rfi.fr](#), August 11, 2012). He was then seen in MUJWA videos overseeing such punishments, including the cutting off of hands. [2] While this may imply Abdelhakim became a hardliner, he was also reported to be sensitive to local people's concerns. For example, in August 2012, when MUJWA was in control of Gao, the *hisba* (Islamic morality police) beat up a popular radio host. This led to civilians' turning on the *hisba* and burning the car of the local leader of the group. MUJWA, in turn, cracked down on those protesters, and injured some of them. However, Abdelhakim apologized to Gao civilians and restored order through mediation ([tamoudre.org](#), August 13, 2012).

According to other reports, Abdelhakim would walk around the coffee shops in Gao to speak to civilians and hear their concerns ([TheAfricanReport](#), February 12). This contrasted with Adnan Abu Wali al-Sahrawi, who was actually administering Gao with other MUJWA leaders while reconfiguring MUJWA's military structure, including by elevating the status of military units comprised of local "sons of the region." [3] However, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi rarely appeared in public and

reportedly worked outside of the public limelight from a Gao hospital ([TheAfricanReport](#), February 12).

Abdelhakim After MUJWA's Collapse

In December 2012, France launched Operation Barkhane, which was aimed at expelling MUJWA and its allied jihadists from the Tuareg-led Ansar al-Din (Supporters of the Religion) from northern Mali. By early 2013, MUJWA was expelled from Gao and both al-Sahrawis were on the run. In 2015, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi then pledged loyalty to Islamic State, which led to the formation of ISGS. [4]

Abdelhakim, for his part, was commanding fighters in the Malian region of Gourma near the Burkina Faso border and declared allegiance to Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi in May 2017, recognizing him as "emir" ([TheAfricanReport](#), February 12). Abdelhakim also appeared in a rare photo of ISGS fighters in Gourma, near Timbuktu, Mali, indicating he did not remain loyal to al-Qaeda after Operation Barkhane ([Menastream](#), October 4, 2017). This was despite two factors: first, MUJWA had emerged as a Sahelian jihadist-led and focused splinter group from the ethnically Algerian-centric al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) that still remained loyal to al-Qaeda; and second, members of both Abdelhakim's and Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi's Western Saharan tribe remained with AQIM-loyal groups in the Sahel. Eventually, those MUJWA and Ansar al-Din members who remained loyal to al-Qaeda formed AQIM's Sahel-based affiliate, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), in 2017 alongside AQIM's Sahel-based brigades. JNIM would soon become ISGS' rival.

Abdelhakim also emerged in an ISGS video in November 2018 from Gourma, Mali executing two "Snitches of the *Sahwa*" (anti-Islamic State

Sunni Muslim “collaborators”), who were forced to dig their own graves. This indicated that Abdelhakim was mirroring the Islamic State’s brutal ways of killing anti-Islamic State vigilantes and was a harsher side of him than had been seen during his time implementing sharia punishments with MUJWA ([Menastream](#), December 21, 2018). Prior to this video, evidence indicated that ISGS established special protection units for Abdelhakim when the Operation Barkhane-backed Malian Armed Forces attempted to attack both Islamic State and JNIM brigades in Gourma ([Menastream](#), October 18, 2018). Abdelhakim’s stock was, therefore, clearly rising in ISGS and he was becoming among the most important jihadist leaders in the Sahel, requiring additional protection from anti-ISGS forces trying to kill him.

ISGS’ Rise and Conflict with JNIM

Abdelhakim was emerging as ISGS’ most prominent figure while Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi still leading the group. Behind-the-scenes, Abdelhakim began planning a series of ISGS raids in the tri-border region. A hint of these upcoming raids was evident when an Abdelhakim-commanded spy was arrested by the Malian Armed Forces while caught tracking gendarmerie movements near the Mali-Mauritanian border ([Malikonokow.com](#), October 16, 2019). Nevertheless, from November 2019 to January 2020, Abdelhakim’s planning bore fruit, with ISGS shocking the region by conducting attacks in Indelimane, Mali, killing 50 soldiers; Inates, Niger, killing 70 soldiers; Chinagodrar, Niger, killing nearly 100 soldiers; and Arbinda, Burkina Faso, killing several soldiers and then dozens of Christian civilians ([France24](#), January 9; [Actuniger](#), January 14).

After France and the G5-Sahel—a West African security alliance including Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger—resolved to combat ISGS in a mid-January meeting in Pau, France, ISGS began alleging that JNIM was conspiring with the regional defense alliance to attack ISGS. This fit in with a broader Islamic State critique of al-Qaeda for collaborating with security forces and compromising *sharia*. In this context, clashes began intensifying between ISGS and JNIM, with ISGS even claiming to have conducted a suicide bombing against JNIM forces ([al-Naba #233](#), May 9). The architect of ISGS’ battles against JNIM was Abdelhakim, who, according to an undated audio from late 2019, called it “legitimate” to wage war against those like JNIM who negotiated with “tyrants” ([Housseyn Ag Issa](#), April 11).

Abdelhakim’s statement represented a condemnation of JNIM’s declarations that it was prepared to negotiate with Mali’s government so long as foreign forces, referring to France, stopped its military operations in Mali. JNIM was, therefore, following the example of the Taliban—to which it is loyal through its connection to al-Qaeda. The Taliban made the same demand before it would negotiate with the Afghan government. However, Abdelhakim’s condemnation of such negotiations epitomized how he had gradually become an Islamic State faithful as well as one of the most influential anti-al-Qaeda jihadists in the Sahel.

Conclusion

Abdelhakim’s career since joining MUJWA has involved several adaptations. Most notably, he progressed to become a more hardline jihadist: for example, he was particularly sensitive to civilians’ needs in Gao, but his oversight of harsh *sharia* punishments in that city during his administration demonstrated his potential to

become a hardliner. Later, his executions of anti-Islamic State vigilantes near the Mali-Burkina Faso border represented an escalation of his level of violence. This also reflected the growing influence of Islamic State on him. Most recently, his assaults on JNIM indicates his complete acculturation into Islamic State.

It is also notable that Abdelhakim has never formally been part of al-Qaeda, as MUJWA itself was an AQIM-aligned splinter group loyal to the terrorist group, but still somewhat outside its affiliate structure. Much of Abdelhakim's career prior to MUJWA's formation is unknown. Nevertheless, one might assume he followed similar footsteps as Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, who was involved in cross-border trafficking in the Sahel, including in Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf, southern Algeria, before he joined AQIM's predecessor, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), and later MUJWA ([TheAfricanReport](#), February 12).

While Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi is still a better-known jihadist than Abdelhakim and even received a verbal commendation from Abubakar al-Baghdadi in his last-ever April 2019 video, Abdelhakim is more than "second-fiddle" to the more popular al-Sahrawi. Abdelhakim has been seen in more videos and has seemingly been more operational on the frontlines than Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi. One might surmise that they coordinate together, with Abdelhakim tasked with being the more public face of the two. Furthermore, if Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi is ever captured or killed, then it is likely Abdelhakim would be his natural successor. This could mean Abdelhakim could eventually become the highest-ranking Islamic State jihadist in the Sahel.

Lastly, it is necessary to note that, in March 2019, ISGS formally became part of Islamic

State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) (also known as Boko Haram) in Islamic State's organizational structure. Islamic State however, has not commented on ISWAP leadership since then and it is unclear who leads the Nigerian branch. At some time, either behind-the-scenes or publicly through its media channels, Islamic State can be expected to delegate authority between ISWAP's Nigerian and Sahelian branches. Abdelhakim will almost certainly be among those featured in these discussions, especially since he is now carrying Islamic State's water in the Sahel by attacking not only regional governments, but also the "infidels" in al-Qaeda.

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Notes

[1] The 2:30 video posted by "AbuSharid" has been removed from YouTube but is preserved on this author's personal website: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/05/09/mujwa-al-murabitun-belmokhtar-aqim-and-isgs-assortment-of-media-2012-onwards/>.

[2] The 7:43 video from January 4, 2013 has been censored from social media platforms but is preserved on this author's personal website: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/05/09/mujwa-al-murabitun-belmokhtar-aqim-and-isgs-assortment-of-media-2012-onwards/>.

[3] The January 5, 2013 document regarding Katibat Ansar al-Sunna was removed from social media platforms but is preserved on this author's personal website: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/05/09/mujwa-al-murabitun-belmokhtar-aqim-and-isgs-assortment-of-media-2012-onwards/>.

[4] The 2:24 October 31, 2016 video of the pledge and 0:56 audio recording from May 19, 2015 of the pledge were removed from social media platforms, but are preserved on this author's personal website: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/05/09/mujwa-al-murabitun-belmokhtar-aqim-and-isgs-assortment-of-media-2012-onwards/>.

Beyond Haftar: A Profile of Aguila Saleh Issa al-Obeidi, Speaker of the Libyan House of Representatives

Dario Cristiani

Introduction

Analyzing Aguila Saleh Issa al-Obeidi's life and career, the peculiarity of his profile compared to that of the many current protagonists of Libyan politics is striking. He is by no means a classic militant leader. He has 50 years of experience in legal issues, and he started navigating the Libyan judiciary environment at the beginning of the Gaddafi era. Aguila Saleh Issa was born on January 11, 1944, in the city of al-Qubba in eastern Libya. In 1970, one year after Gaddafi's revolution, he graduated from the University of Benghazi with a degree in law. Soon after, he started a long and fruitful career as a legal expert. After graduation, he joined the Ministry of Justice, being appointed as a public prosecutor in 1971. He then rapidly climbed to several positions in the judiciary. In 1974, he was appointed to lead the prosecution office of the Jabal al-Akhdar district in Bayda, and two years later he was seconded to work in the Jabal al-Akhdar Appeals Court. At the end of the 1990s, Saleh became the head of the Judicial Inspection Department in the Derna Court of Appeal ([Afrigatenews](#), August 5, 2014).

The Libyan revolution broke out on February 17, 2011, leading to the fall of the Jamahiriya government and the death of Gaddafi by the end of the year. The National Transitional Council (NTC) formed on February 27, 2011, and appointed Saleh as a member of the judicial committee. He was placed in charge of investigating corruption cases from the Gaddafi's years.

After the elections for the House of Representatives (HoR) held on June 25, 2014, the newly elected parliament appointed Saleh as speaker after he won the second round of voting against Abu Bakr Baira, by a 77-74 margin. However, only 158 deputies out of 200 voted, as the Islamist members and the representatives of the Misrata bloc boycotted the vote. Islamist forces used to dominate the predecessor of the HoR, the General National Congress, which emerged from the July 2012 elections ([Al Jazeera](#), August 6, 2014).

As the international community was trying to strike a deal for a new, national arrangement—an effort that would produce the Skhirat agreement and the Government of the National Accord (GNA)—Saleh expressed on several occasions his opposition against the accord. However, he eventually accepted it, but often stressed that the Skhirat agreement was not enough to bring peace to Libya ([Libya Herald](#), January 1, 2016; [The Middle East Eye](#), February 22, 2017; [Al Marsad](#), June 24, 2019). His initial opposition to this agreement cost him dearly, as both the EU and the United States imposed sanctions on him, charging that was he actively working to obstruct and delay the formation of the UN-backed government ([Middle East Eye](#), October 1, 2016). Interestingly enough, while Saleh remains under sanctions today, neither the EU nor the U.S. have ever imposed sanctions on Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar, who launched a military operation to dislodge the GNA government that emerged from the Skhirat agreement.

A Real Easterner

Al-Jazeera, a pan-Arab media outlet known for its proximity to western Libyan groups, noted that Saleh was not known for any significant political activity during the times of Gaddafi and that his political orientations were not known when he began to emerge into the post-revolutionary environment ([Al Jazeera](#), August 6, 2014). Writing at the time of the emerging split

between western and eastern forces, it is likely that this note served to undermine Saleh's revolutionary credentials. This has been a common rhetorical stance in Libya over the past few years, especially since the beginning of Haftar's Operation Dignity in 2014. At that time, the inheritance of the revolution started becoming more and more contested. Many groups were accusing others of betraying the spirit of the February 17 revolution. In the case of Saleh, given his long-standing career in the judiciary administration during Gaddafi's regime, it is thus easy to understand why he had never exposed himself. Doing so politically would have meant the end of his professional and legal career. However, this does not necessarily imply that he was a devotee of the previous regime.

Saleh is a member of the al-Obeidat tribe (also spelled as Ubaidat or Ibidat, depending on the transliteration conventions used), one of the most prominent tribes in eastern Libyan ([al-Ain](#), July 30, 2018). This powerful tribe, which dominates the socio-political landscape around Bayda, Derna, Tobruk, and surrounding areas, has been the local actor controlling security in the area since the time of the Ottomans. The al-Obeidat is composed of fifteen sub-tribes, each in charge of a specific territory with a local sheik ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), February 22, 2011). At the time of the monarchy, this tribe had a crucial role, being the defender of the local eastern religious order. However, this tribe—or at least some members of it—retained its prominence even during Gaddafi's time, although, during those years more Islamist-leaning groups inside the tribe were progressively marginalized. For instance, Major General Abdel Fattah Younis al-Obeidi was from this tribe. He was quite close to Gaddafi and a former interior minister who defected to rebel forces on February 22, 2011, and was killed the following July.

Internal differences in how to deal with Gaddafi were not necessarily an exclusive feature of tribes that were not part of the main bloc supporting

the regime. For instance, the Warfalla—Libya’s biggest tribe, allegedly counting more than one million people and a major pillar of Gaddafi’s regime—is the tribe to which belonged several military officers who attempted to carry out a coup in the early 1990s. The role of tribes under Gaddafi became more pronounced after the “Brother Leader” realized that his ambition of undermining tribal logic in Libya, one of his initial goals immediately after the revolution, could backfire.

As such, by the mid-1970s, Gaddafi started to increasingly rely on local tribes to guarantee the support for the regime, while making sure that none of these actors could become so significant as to undermine his rule. Indeed, in eastern Libya, members of the al-Obeidat became crucial to preserving the regime’s authority in the east. This in an area in which the Gaddafi government had little tribal outreach, and where federalist and independent feelings were always significant, especially when eastern cities began feeling that the regime in Tripoli was not treating them fairly.

Although tribal allegiances should not be overestimated, this background is important in highlighting two elements. First, how much Saleh is embedded in the socio-political dynamics of the east. Second, that he belongs to one of the most significant tribes of the Cyrenaica region that had long-standing responsibilities in running the local security apparatus. He and the social and tribal groups of reference have relationships with the relevant local players and regional actors that are deeper than that of many actors who emerged in eastern Libya only more recently. Third, the al-Obeidat tribe is among the most important supporters of federalist and independence movements in eastern Libya, an element that collides with Haftar’s vision for a deeply centralized state centered upon him, his family, and his immediate circle of allies. As such, this alliance looks more like a temporary convergence

of tactical interests, rather than a truly strategic connection. These three elements are essential to analyzing some of the shifts that are starting to appear in eastern Libya these days.

The Relationship With Haftar

As such, the al-Obeidat tribe historically dominates several crucial military and security institutions of this area, and their historical role, material resources, and local network allow them to maintain a more significant degree of strategic and political autonomy. This element is essential as, over the years, the narratives on Libya often described Haftar as the true, and often the sole, representative of the eastern region’s grievances. This is only partially true. Haftar also comes from a major eastern tribe, the al-Ferjani. Still, his grasp over many communities in the eastern Libya is not as strong as that of other, more embedded actors. That regional alliance was more of a temporary marriage of convenience.

Haftar did a fine job in emerging as the dominant player in the east between 2015-2016. He failed to play a significant role in the revolution in 2011, immediately after he came back to Libya from the United States, and in the early months of 2014 when he was not considered strong enough. In those months, external actors, such as Egypt, that later endorsed him were initially reluctant. While the other major sponsors of Haftar, including the UAE, have always been keen on the renegade general, support from Egypt was not so strong at the beginning. Egypt has long-standing relations with local groups and tribes in eastern Libya. Indeed, one of the first visits Saleh made after being elected as HoR speaker was to Egypt, to meet with President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi ([Al Ahram](#), August 26, 2014). Before the revolution, Haftar spent almost 20 years living in the United States. He even has dual citizenship, and can hardly be considered a fully local player, especially compared to someone like Saleh.

Haftar's initial attempt to present himself as a sort of Libyan al-Sisi were also not particularly welcome in Cairo. The situation changed as Egypt became more and more dependent on Gulf countries, namely the UAE and Saudi Arabia, because of the economic crisis ([Egypt Independent](#), May 20, 2017; [Al Jazeera](#), June 14; [The National {Abu Dhabi}](#), April 23, 2016, [The Gulf Online](#), May 29). Besides, the capacity of Haftar to win the support of local groups in eastern Libya, itself a function of the money that Gulf countries gave him, reinforced this bond.

While Saleh is one of the crucial local actors that permitted Haftar to emerge as the key military—and thus political—actor in the east, relations between the two are not necessarily without friction. Problems have emerged in the past ([Libya Herald](#), May 17, 2017). More recently, Saleh proposed a roadmap for the country, drafted with support from Russia and welcomed by the United Nations ([Libya Herald](#), April 28). This roadmap was released around the time Haftar declared his intention to take full control of the country as “the people demanded him.” However, this announcement was slightly in contradiction to Saleh's plan. Despite Saleh himself denying any major disagreement with Haftar, a significant difference between the two was apparent ([Al Marsad](#), May 2). In addition, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov criticized Haftar's move ([Vestnik Kavkaza](#), April 30). Russian support for the eastern warlord is much more complex than many believe, as Haftar is one of the Russian options, but not the only one ([Al-Monitor](#), May 13). While the Russian defense minister maintained close relations with the Field Marshall, other actors in Moscow—from Lavrov to President Vladimir Putin himself—kept channels open with a plethora of other Libyan actors, from both the west and east. Saleh is one of those, and an essential one, given the weight he and his tribe carry in eastern Libya.

Conclusion

Aguila Saleh Issa al-Obeidi is a crucial actor for the political balance of eastern Libya. He is not only a seasoned legal expert with more than 50 years of experience, but also a top representative of one of the most important tribes of eastern Libya, the al-Obeidat. Despite the internal divisions that have characterized this tribe over the decades—a regular feature of the usually non-monolithic world of Libyan tribes—the al-Obeidat tribe represents crucial support for whoever aims at controlling eastern Libya. Given their long-standing role in controlling local security institutions, this tribe is also likely to have well-established relations with neighboring powers, including Egypt. At the beginning of his rise as the strongman in the east, Khalifa Haftar was not supported by all the actors in eastern Libya. This was indeed a process, nurtured by the growing financial and diplomatic support that external backers gave him. When Egypt became more accepting of him, many groups in eastern Libya aligned. Aguila Saleh was one such person to fall in line. Yet, he also maintained some freedom of action, and he could do so as the representative of a crucial Libyan eastern actor who is less dependent on Haftar than others. As the western Libya offensive is coming to an end with the likely defeat of Haftar's forces, this leadership dynamic is pushing many eastern Libyan actors to review their options. The recent announcement from Saleh of a new political roadmap that the Russians agreed with should thus be seen against this backdrop. Independently of the outcomes of the current political phase in Libya, Aguila Saleh and his tribe are set to remain crucial players in any future arrangement.

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