



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

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Iran's Taliban Connection: Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir

John Foulkes

On June 1, a report from the UN monitoring team was publicly released, stating that, "at least one group of senior Taliban had already formed a new group in opposition to any possible peace agreement, purportedly known as Hezb-e Wilayat Islami..." The report stated that the group was formed by former Taliban leaders residing outside Afghanistan. Further investigation by other sources concluded that this new faction was formed and is now based in Iran (Tolo News, June 3; UN, May 27; Gandhara, June 9).

While the exact membership of the new group has not yet been revealed, the recent news brings to focus the role of Taliban leaders with ties to Tehran. One of the most prominent of such leaders is Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir.

Zakir was born in 1973 in Soply, in the Kajaki district of Helmand province. He is an ethnic Pashtun and member of the Alizai tribe. Zakir is believed to have joined the Taliban in 1997,

rising to a position of leadership within the organization. In 2001, however, he surrendered to U.S.-led coalition forces in Mazar-e-Sharif as the Taliban regime began collapsing. He became a prisoner in Guantanamo Bay, until his transfer to the Afghan prison Pul-e-Charki prison in December 2007. However, in a move that would prove controversial, Zakir would be released by the government in May 2008, allegedly due to pressure from tribal elders (Afghan Bios, September 4, 2016; Al Jazeera, January 27, 2016).

After his release, Zakir quickly rejoined the insurgency, traveling to Quetta, Pakistan, and becoming an influential in the Quetta Shura, or *Rahbari Shura*, the Taliban leadership council. From there, he became a prominent deputy to Mullah Muhammad Omar, the founder and then-leader of the Taliban, overseeing operations in southern Afghanistan and the organizations' provincial shadow governments, including in his native Helmand.

In 2010, Mullah Omar appointed Zakir as leader of the Taliban's military commission, in charge of the insurgency's day-to-day operations throughout Afghanistan. Zakir was reportedly

removed from his position in 2014 due to differences with the senior Taliban leader, Mullah Akhtar Mansour. The Taliban statement at the time stated that his resignation from the position was “due to his prolonged battle with ill-health,” but it was believed to be due to Zakir and Mansour’s differences over peace negotiations with the Afghan government.

In 2015, when Mullah Omar’s death was publicly revealed—he is believed to have actually died in 2013—Mansour succeeded him. Mansour’s elevation to leadership sparked internal tension within the Taliban and the emergence of breakaway factions in the group. He reportedly attempted to open negotiations with the Afghan government, and was considered close to Pakistani intelligence. Zakir had boycotted the process which appointed Mansour as supreme leader in 2015, and in fact favored the appointment of Mullah Omar’s son, Mullah Yaqoob (Al Jazeera, August 3, 2015). In addition, Zakir, an avowed hardliner, was opposed to reconciliation with the Afghan and U.S. governments. However, Zakir swore allegiance to Mansour on March 30, 2016, after the new leader reportedly met some of his demands (Pakistan Tribune, March 30, 2016). These demands were rumored to include a review of the Taliban’s intra-Afghan peace strategy and other internal policies. Zakir, an avowed hardliner, held back on swearing allegiance to Mansour because of what he saw as a conciliatory policy toward the Afghan government, and closeness with Pakistan (Outlook, April 11, 2016). Mansour was killed in a U.S. drone strike in May 2016, and was succeeded within four days by Haibatullah Akhundzada, the current leader of the Taliban. Akhundzada was considered an apolitical choice, and was reportedly the unanimous decision of the Quetta Shura (Pakistan Tribune, May 26, 2016; Outlook Afghanistan, May 29, 2016; see MLM, December 10, 2018).

Zakir’s replacement as head of the Taliban’s military commission, Ibrahim Sardar, was himself recently replaced by Mullah Yaqoob on May 7, 2020. Following this reorganization, Sardar and Zakir were made deputies to Yaqoob, with each overseeing operations in southern and eastern Afghanistan, respectively (Arab News, May 10). The move was seen as an attempt to unify the organization’s leadership in the runup to intra-Afghan peace talks. Sardar and Zakir are both Alizai tribesmen, and hardliners who are opposed to peace talks. The two are representative of a wider faction in favor of continued fighting, and are opposed to the Nurazi tribal faction loyal to Akhundzada (UN, May 27; see MLM, June 2).

Connection to Iran

In October 2014, Zakir reportedly led a secret delegation of Taliban leaders to Iran, to discuss the possibility of establishing a safe haven there for the organization. Zakir hoped the meeting would result in a new foreign sponsor that would balance the influence of the Pakistani government on the Taliban. However, Tehran refused to provide safe haven for the group unless it broke ties with al-Qaeda, which Zakir refused to do. He was able to attain financial assistance from Tehran, however, and the Iranian emissaries would allow the treatment of injured Taliban fighters to occur in their country (see TM, June 12, 2015). For Zakir, this was an attempt to regain influence in the organization after his removal by Mansour as head of the Taliban’s military commission.

While this early mission to Iran was not a complete success, it did place Zakir in connection to Iranian officials. On October 23, 2018, the U.S. Treasury, under the multinational Terrorist Financing Targeting Center (TFTC) designated nine Taliban officials for facilitating support for the group from Iran, in order to undermine the Afghan government. One of

these nine individuals was Ibrahim Sadar, who is closely aligned with Zakir as leaders of a conservative, hardline faction of the Taliban. U.S. Treasury reports that Sadar received monetary support and individual combat training to its fighters from Iran ([U.S. Treasury](#), October 23, 2018; [Gandhara](#), June 10). Iran is attempting to use its support to make inroads with the group, hedging its bets in case the Taliban successfully takes over the country and reestablishes their Islamic Emirate.

Conclusion

Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir remains a popular military leader among hardline Taliban commanders in Afghanistan. Despite losing his position as head of the group's military commission in 2014, and becoming a deputy to the younger Mullah Yaqoob in 2020, he still holds support and influence over a large number of fighters. Zakir holds the potential to act as a spoiler in the ongoing peace process in Afghanistan. With the support of a conservative, hardline faction within the Taliban, which he leads, and with connections to Iran—making him potentially more independent from Pakistani pressure—Zakir has little motivation to engage in the peace process. He will likely continue to push his organization to continue fighting until they have accomplished their military objectives on the battlefield, which is the departure of US forces from Afghanistan.

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Omar Shaikh's Release: Opening Pandora's Box

Farhan Zahid

One of the most interesting developments during the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan was the decision by the Sindh High Court to overturn the death sentence of Ahmad Omar Saeed Shaikh for beheading the *Wall Street Journal's* correspondent and South Asia bureau chief, Daniel Pearl, in January 2002. In July 2002, he was sentenced to death by the Anti-Terrorism Court in Hyderabad on murder and kidnapping for ransom charges ([SATP-2002 Judgment](#), July 15, 2002). Interestingly, Shaikh's appeal to the High Court had been pending since 2009, and after 11 years the court released him, citing weak evidence. The court only convicted him for kidnapping the slain journalist and sentenced him to seven years, which he has already served (Shaikh has been imprisoned since 2002). The decision was heavily criticized by human rights organizations, the U.S. government and international media. As a result, the Sindh government ordered that Shaikh be re-arrested and detained for a period of three months ([Gulf News](#), April 3).

Who is Omar Shaikh?

Born in London in 1973 to parents of Pakistani descent, Omar Shaikh was once a normal person who was keenly interested in physical activities and sports. He was also a brilliant student during his school and college years. However, he started his jihadist career in Bosnia in 1992 and rose to join Harkat ul-Mujahedeen, becoming a founding member of Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), and developed close ties with members of al-Qaeda. Harkat ul-Mujahedeen is an al-Qaeda-linked Pakistani Islamist terrorist group.

Shaikh was an exceptional recruit. He had studied at the London School of Economics and

worked at London's stock market before finally joining the jihadist cause and fighting in Bosnia, Pakistan and with the Islamist insurgency in Indian Kashmir. Police arrested him while he was on a mission in New Delhi in 1994 to kidnap a U.S. citizen in order to secure the release of Masood Azhar, the then-secretary general of Harkat ul-Mujahedeen (Tribune India, February 15, 2002) He, along with Masood Azhar and Mushtaq Zargar, were among the terrorists released on the demands of the militants who hijacked Air India Flight IC-814 in 1999 (ThePrint, December 29, 2019).

After his release, Shaikh developed close relations with al-Qaeda, based in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban did play a role in Shaikh's release, as the hijacked flight was allowed to land in Kandahar. The Taliban did not allow the Indian government to conduct any rescue operations against the hijackers. Shaikh once again came to public attention after his arrest in Daniel Pearl's kidnapping and murder, for which he was sentenced to death in 2002. [1]

About to Return to Business

The long pending appeal of Omar Shaikh and three accomplices (Salman Saqib, Shaikh Adil, and Fahad Naseem) was disposed by the Sindh High Court on April 2. The defense counsel originally filed the appeal in 2002 and it remained pending for the next 18 years. The court overturned the judgment on account of a weak investigation and the magistrate submitting flawed recordings of statements by the accused, and dropped the murder charges against all four defendants. The investigations were criticized by the judges as there was no mention of Shaikh's place of arrest, though publicly it was known that he surrendered to the authorities in Lahore. Despite these legal lacunas, Omar was found guilty of kidnapping Pearl but not of holding Pearl for ransom. Pearl's kidnapping involved an elaborate trap: he was led to believe that Omar Shaikh (a.k.a. Bashir; a.k.a. Farooq Muzefar) was

a *murid* (disciple) of the spiritual leader Peer Mubarak Ali Gilani of the U.S.-based group, Jamaat ul Fuqra. Pearl suspected Gilani helped finance the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the U.S., and came to investigate in Pakistan. [2]

Another issue, which was surprisingly not discussed in the detailed verdict of the Sindh High Court, was Khalid Shaikh Mohammad's statement during his interrogation at Guantanamo Bay, when he claimed to have beheaded Pearl "with his blessed right hand" (TRT World, July 30, 2019). This issue was earlier highlighted by Omar Shaikh's lawyer in the appeal, but the court did not mention anything about it in its verdict.

The decision to overturn Omar Shaikh's death sentence, despite its timing, has attracted plenty of criticism, and Pearl's parents have filed for an appeal in Pakistan's Supreme Court. Pakistan's government, because of mounting international pressure, has also delayed the release of Shaikh and his three accomplices.

Factors Overlooked by the Court

Apart from the decision, the court overlooked certain realities, including that Omar Shaikh and his three accomplices were high-ranking members of the proscribed Islamist terrorist group JeM, whose leader, Masood Azhar, was added in 2019 to the United Nations list of individuals sanctioned for links to al-Qaeda and Islamic State. Moreover, Shaikh is a known international terrorist involved in terrorist attacks in Pakistan and India. It should not be forgotten that Shaikh was released after the hijacking and remains wanted in India on kidnapping and terrorism charges. He is linked to al-Qaeda and was apparently a close confidant of Khalid Shaikh Mohammad, the 9/11 mastermind and someone who claimed to have himself been involved in the Pearl beheading.

With this background, it seems likely that the decision was made to appease Islamist elements in Pakistan -- to gain their support during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. Omar Shaikh could still be an important asset to Islamist terrorist networks. Since Shaikh's imprisonment, these organizations have faced a challenging environment, due to consecutive security operations and the destruction of their hideouts and safe havens in tribal areas and other places in Pakistan where they have influence. It will be interesting to see the outcome of the appeal in the Supreme Court. Due to mounting international pressure, Pakistan's government has been pressured not to release Shaikh. Had it done so, he could have joined the Islamist terrorist networks based in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border regions or in eastern Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Terrorists like Ahmad Omar Saeed Shaikh could become vital tools for any Islamist terrorist organization. He has experience in planning and perpetrating acts of terrorism, and could function as a propagandist and recruiter. Shaikh is smart, highly educated, grew up in the West, is ideologically motivated, and has combat experience. He is an ideal terrorist leader with zeal and potential. The reasoning for the court's decision to drop charges against him is still not known. Shaikh's release would be a blow to Pakistan's and international efforts to counter Islamist terrorist organizations in the region. Pakistani policymakers should not allow him to be released at this critical stage.

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Notes

[1] Discussions with an Islamabad-based journalist who covers security issues, June 10.

[2] For details please see the text of the ruling.

The Islamic State's Shadow Caliph: Abu Ibrahim al- Hashimi al-Qureshi

Halla Diyab

On June 24, the U.S. State Department announced that it was raising its reward for information on Islamic State's mysterious leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qureshi, to \$10 million (Rewards for Justice, June 24). Al-Qureshi, a.k.a. Amir Mohammed Abdul Rahman al-Mawli al-Salbi, is reported to be the second and current caliph of Islamic State (IS). He succeeds Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was killed in an operation by U.S. special forces on October 27, 2019. He is also known as Abu Umar al-Turkmani and Hajji Abdulla. Born sometime in the 1970s, al-Qureshi was a largely unknown background figure in IS until al-Baghdadi's death. Al-Qureshi graduated from the University of Mosul with a degree in Islamic Law, and is reported to have been a close associate of Abu Ala al-Afari. [1] Al-Qureshi is believed to be one of the founders of the Islamic State in Iraq. He was close with al-Baghdadi, as they were inmates together in Camp Bucca in 2004. [2] Al-Qureshi was appointed as his deputy shortly after the group's formation. It is reported that al-Qureshi is the author of the book *Jurisprudence of Cataclysms*, which was banned by the IS delegated committee after its potential replacements for Baghdadi publication (Al Araby, November 1, 2019).

Al-Qureshi, then known as Hajji Abdulla, was active in al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was a predecessor of IS, from his release to Camp Bucca in 2004 to 2014, when he swore fealty to IS. Al-Qureshi was one of the leaders of the IS genocide against the Yazidis in 2014. As a

leading ideologue of the organization, he oversaw the ideological justification for the violence. In addition, he reportedly led the planning of international terrorist attacks against Western targets on behalf of the organization (180 Post, January 28). On August 21, 2019, before al-Baghdadi's death, the U.S. State Department placed its first bounty on him at \$5 million as part of its Reward for Justice program million (Rewards for Justice, June 24). Bounties were put out for two other senior members of the group who were also seen as potential replacements for Baghdadi.

Al-Qureshi's earlier pseudonym, Haji Abdulla, was mentioned during a broadcast of the audio series "Clarifying Matters of Methodology" on IS' Al-Bayan online radio station in January 2018. The series was part of an effort by IS to explain the ideology of the insurgency (Noor-Book). [3] He ordered the broadcast stopped. Signaling ideological contention within IS, al-Qureshi had the members of IS' delegated committee and methodological committees, which oversaw the radio show, arrested. Formerly leading members of these leadership committees, including Abu Abd Rahman al-Zarqawi, Abu Muhamed al-Masri, and Aos al-Najdi, were arrested. [4] [5] These members were allegedly opposed to the ideological arguments made by al-Furqan Media Foundation, which al-Qureshi had a leading role in crafting. Al-Qureshi then assigned the members of a new delegated committee, which he oversaw. The coup resulted in greater for al-Qureshi influence within IS, pushing out his ideological opponents and placing him in a leading role in the insurgency (180 Post, January 28).

Turkmen Connections

Al-Qureshi is reported to be of Iraqi Turkmen descent, which makes him one of the few non-Arab members of IS' core leadership. One of his pseudonyms, Haji Abdulla al-Afri, can be traced to Tal Afar. [6] The name al-Qureshi is a popular surname among the Turkmen families who claim to have had Arabic roots before they settled in Tal Afar. The Turkmen of Tal Afar are also known as "Karadeesh" in reference to the term *kardash*, which means "brother" in the Turkmen language. The Karadeesh tribe immigrated to Mosul following the violence between Sunni and Shia Muslims that took place in Iraq in 2006 ([180 Post](#), January 28).

Al-Baghdadi made efforts to connect with the Karadeeshi tribe, and appointed important members of the tribe to leadership positions within the group. This included Abu Moataz al-Qureshi, who was made a *wali* (governor) in Iraq. He also appointed Abdul al-Naser al-Afrali to the IS delegated committee in Syria. The chosen leaders then appointed a Turkmen entourage, and made al-Qureshi—or as he was known then, Hajji Abdulla—a *diwan* (minister) ([180Post](#), January 28).

On March 23, 2019, the Syrian Democratic Forces arrested a high-ranking Islamic State official, Taha Abdul Rahim Abdulla. Abdulla claimed that al-Qureshi's brother lived in Turkey, and that he was a member of the Iraqi Turkmen Front, a political organization operating in Turkey ([Al-Quds](#), November 4, 2019).

Mysterious Identity

Al-Qureshi's past activism demonstrates a proclivity towards hiding his identity in order to maintain his security. Despite being a veteran militant, it is difficult to trace his personal history from before his rise to leadership of IS. No

photos, visual or audio or social media posts of him seem to exist even though he was involved in the insurgency's media propaganda unit, al-Furqan.

Unlike al-Baghdadi, al-Qureshi did not deliver a speech upon his inauguration as caliph. Most of the insurgency's media and press releases are now delivered by the spokesman of the group, Abu Hamza al-Qureshi ([Al-Jazeera](#), January 27). In the wake of the insurgency's territorial loss, Islamic State likely realized the security risk associated with having its leaders give frequent propaganda messages.

Al-Qureshi 's Response to COVID-19

Al-Qureshi has capitalized on the insurgency's online media propaganda machine to exploit the epidemic to the insurgency's advantage. The epidemic was described by IS as "God's punishment of the world's tyrants and oppressors" in a 39-minute-long audio recording delivered by the group's spokesman, Abu Hamza al-Qureshi ([Arabic.Euronews](#), May 29). The group published an infographic, which provided instructions for its militants on how to deal with the epidemic. The insurgents were instructed to "cover the mouth when yawning and sneezing," cover the glasses or cups of their drink, and to wash their hands frequently. The insurgents were also advised not to enter countries with high rates of infection. Those who believe they might have contracted coronavirus are being told to self-isolate from where they are residing ([Arabi21](#), March 13).

The group is exploiting the vulnerable economic situation in the region by attempting to persuade potential recruits to join the group, pointing to its supposedly available fund of \$100 million. According to the IS publication al-Naba, the group hopes to take advantage of the lack of security forces on the ground in Iraq, and use the

epidemic to broaden its resurgence. The group claims to have carried out 1,557 attacks ([Enabbaladi](#), March 30).

Conclusion

Al-Qureshi remains a mysterious figure, but the organization he leads appears to be reestablishing itself as an insurgency following its wide territorial losses. Under al-Qureshi's leadership, IS has reorganized into what is now becoming a potent insurgency that has been successfully staging attacks in Iraq and Syria. The group conducted 108 attacks in April, and appears to be increasing its assault on Diyala, Kirkuk and Saladin provinces. In Syria, IS fighters launched a series of attacks on government-held areas from Homs to the eastern province of Deir el-Zour. In a coordinated assault on Syrian positions in Sukhna on April 9, IS fighters forced regime forces to send reinforcements and call in airstrikes. According to a non-profit which tracks the Syrian civil war, IS forces were responsible for the deaths of 401 regime troops and allied militias between March 24 and April 9 ([al-Monitor](#), April 12).

Al-Qureshi appears to be attempting to establish his leadership by successfully planning and implementing attacks in the region. To reinvigorate his organization, he will draw from his extensive jihadist experience and take advantage of the region's ongoing turmoil.

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Notes

[1] Abu Ala Al Afri Abu Ali al-Anbari was the governor for territories held by IS in Syria. He was considered second-in-command of IS and was viewed as a potential successor of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi but was killed in March 2016.

[2] Camp Bucca was a detention facility maintained by the United States military in the vicinity of Umm Qasr, Iraq.

[3] Al-Bayan is Islamic State's official radio station, based in Iraq.

[4] The delegated committee is in charge of the insurgency's daily management, including decision making and supervision of terrorist operations, as the leader al-Baghdadi was keen not to get involved in daily management of the insurgency out of fear of being captured by the American-led forces. The committee consists of several emir in charge of security, the military and Sharia law. These emirs are led by a single chief who is in charge of terrorist operations, and also coordinates the operations of the insurgency and the funds he has under his control. Haji Iraqi used to be the leader of the committee and was once expected to succeed al-Baghdadi. As stated in al-Naba (the official weekly newspaper published by the group) the committee also includes an official who is called emir of immigration and is in charge of foreign terrorist operations. This division of the insurgency organized foreign attacks in France, Brussels, Sri Lanka ([Almarjie-paris](#), November 2019).

[5] The methodological committee supervises and controls the methodological content in any of the insurgency's publication or literature.

[6] Tal Afar is a city and district in the Ninawa governorate of northwestern Iraq.

Shaykh Musa Seka Baluku: The Mysterious Leader of Congolese Islamist ADF

Sunguta West

Shaykh Musa Seka Baluku, an Islamist militant leader operating in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), has recently taken steps to rebuild and strengthen the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). Baluku has led the terrorist group for the past five years.

Under his direction, ADF fighters have stepped up attacks, killing thousands of civilians, army soldiers, and peacekeepers in the restive eastern region of the DRC. The insurgency, under his leadership, has continued to destabilize the region, which is the base of several armed rebel groups.

The surging violence has brought the 50-year-old militant leader, a.k.a. Mzee Kajuju, into focus. Baluku has been steering the group since 2015, when Shaykh Jamil Mukulu, the former leader and founder, was arrested in Tanzania. Since then, Baluku has risen to become the emir, and consolidated his power. He eventually became the sole decision-maker for a group best known for massacres, crucifixions and beheadings in the eastern DRC ([Joramjojo](#), June 11, 2019).

Baluku has 20 years of experience as a fighter and Islamist, beginning his career when ADF first emerged. In 1995, Mukulu—a convert from Roman Catholicism—merged an Islamist sect known as Tablighi Jamaat with a rebel group known as the National Army of the Liberation of Uganda (NALU) to form the ADF. He immediately assumed the role of supreme leader of the new group.

Mukulu, at a meeting in Beni, brought together three sects—the Uganda Muslim Freedom

Fighters, the National Army of the Liberation of Uganda and the former Rwenzururu—to create a 6,500-strong force. The merger was made possible following the assassination of Amon Kabunga Bazira, a politician who founded NALU, by an unknown assailant in Nakuru, Kenya in 1983. Ugandan intelligence services were blamed for his murder (Daily Monitor, August 6, 2016).

Under Mukulu, the new Islamist rebel coalition continued its insurgency against Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's government, aimed at replacing it with one governed by *sharia*. The initial financial and logistical support came from former Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko. By 2002, pressure from the Uganda People's Defense Force had pushed ADF into the DRC (New Vision, November 21, 2019).

Now under Baluku, the ADF has been widely described as a rebel group without a direction or clear ideology. It seems only to terrorize civilians while avoiding direct contact with the Congolese army. Its former leader and founder Mukulu remains in a Ugandan prison awaiting trial in the International Criminal Court (ICC). He is facing several charges, including murder and crimes against humanity, from his time as leader of the ADF.

Baluku, like his predecessor, is accused of brutalizing the people of the DRC. Recently, he became the subject of UN sanctions for terrorist activities in the region. He is also included on a list of people wanted by Interpol and the ICC.

In announcing sanctions on February 6, the U.N. Security Council reported that, since 1995, Baluku had committed, planned or directed repeated attacks, targeted killings, maimings, rape and other sexual violence. He had also abducted civilians, including children, as well as attacked health facilities, in particular in Beni territory. He is accused of recruiting children

during attacks and subjecting villagers to forced labor (Daily Monitor, December 12, 2019)

On June 22, the militant group killed at least 19 people in eastern DRC, while the bodies of nine people kidnapped were found in North Kivu. In Ituri Province, ADF fighters attacked the village of Bukaka on June 20 and killed 10 civilians. In late May, the militant group killed at least 40 people in Makutano village with machetes and looted food and other valuables. Most of the killings are believed to be revenge attacks by the group following the continued Congolese army assault on their bases.

Reports indicate that the organization had killed over 1,000 people between January 2014 to April 2019. At least 315 killings took place between June and September 2018. By then, the group had changed its name to Medina at Tauheed Wa Mujahedeen (MTM). The Arabic name translates to, "The City of Monotheism and Holy Warriors." Analysts have viewed the change of name as an attempt to align itself more closely with established Islamist terrorist groups. It appears to indicate the group's changing interest from overthrowing the Ugandan government to a struggle for Islam. Recently, the group displayed the same flags as al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda, Islamic State and Boko Haram (Daily Monitor, April 25, 2019).

Bakulu was born in 1970 in western Uganda's Kasese district. He is believed to have become a jihadist at an early age and at one time served as an imam at the Malakaz, Tablighi Jamaat Mosque in the Ugandan capital Kampala. Tablighi Jamaat is a missionary movement of Islam that urges Muslims to return to the practices of the Prophet Muhammad.

While there are few details about his early life, he is believed to be one of earliest members of ADF, joining the group in the late 1990s. While most of the ADF leaders hailed from the Basonga, a western Ugandan tribe, the militant

leader is a member of the Konzo or Konjo, a tribe that lives in the Rowenzori Mountains. Baluku is reported to have taken several wives in Uganda and the DRC, two of them being the daughters of the former leader, Mukulu.

Reports quoting ADF defectors have described Baluku as violent and short tempered. He has ordered the abduction of children to serve as child soldiers and has presided over mass killings. Baluku has also been known to consolidate his power within the ADF through brutal intimidation tactics, and has executed suspected dissidents by beheading or crucifixion.

Before becoming its leader, Bakulu served in several leadership positions within the ADF, including as Mukulu's chief lieutenant. He also held the position of ADF's chief Islamic judge. Those who attacked civilians, killed innocent people or stole were considered to have broken the law. He also served as the group's political commissar, and was in charge of teaching new recruits ADF's ideology. This also included leading daily prayers in the camp ([Joramjojo](#), June 11, 2019).

Before Mukulu's arrest in 2014, the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC) launched Operation Sukola I against the ADF. Hundreds of ADF fighters were killed, while others surrendered and a large number of others were captured.

Reports have quoted the FARDC as saying that it has captured an ADF headquarters and killed five of the group's main commanders. Although combined statistics on ADF casualties are not available, on February 17, 2014, the Congolese army announced that it had killed 230 ADF fighters after a month-long offensive. On December 8, 2017, 72 insurgents were killed in a firefight when the ADF launched an attack UN camp in North Kivu. On May 26, 2019, at least 26 ADF fighters were killed when they attempted to run over a joint FARDC-UN camp in the

village of Ngite, near Mavivi. On January 13, 2020, at least 40 ADF fighters were killed, including another five top commanders in an intense battle that ensued after the Congolese army raided the Medina Camp. On February 9, 40 insurgents surrendered to the FARDC.

The operation split the rebel force into two, with Mukulu fleeing with one group and Bakulu moving deeper into the Congolese forest with a much larger group. He evacuated his group from Medina I, the group's main headquarters in the eastern DRC, after it was captured by the army, moving to Camp Kajuju in Medina II, in the Beni region ([Chimpreports](#), February 13).

The operations weakened the group, but Baluku has succeeded in re-constituting and rebuilding it, placing the ADF under his single command. At the moment, he is believed to command between 400 and 1,000 fighters. The group reportedly remains largely stable and in position. ([Kharon](#), February 7, 2020).

In December 2017, Baluku is believed to have been badly wounded when the Ugandan military attacked an ADF camp in the eastern DRC. He is thought to have survived the attack, but with serious injuries.

Unlike the ADF's former leader, Baluku has expanded the group's outreach in social media, targeting new recruits using tactics similar to other militant groups, like al-Shabaab and Boko Haram. He has also aligned the ADF with better known jihadist groups like Islamic State (IS) and al-Shabaab ([People Pill](#), Jan 1, 2020).

Although links with al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa, is largely a matter of speculation, Baluku's ADF is also alleged to have links to IS links. In early April 2019, while in Washington, DRC President Felix Tshisekendi claimed that ADF was working with IS and declared war against the group. While in Washington, Tshisekendi sought a strategic

partnership with the United States in order to gain military support for the country's fight against IS (The Nile Wires, April 19, 2019).

In April 2019, Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for two attacks on villages in eastern DRC, the region where ADF has been operating. Several soldiers were wounded in the attack on Kimango village in Beni near Uganda's border with the DRC. Around the same time, the militant group claimed responsibility for another attack on the village of Bovata, also in Beni. IS used the attacks to announce the formation of its new Islamic State-Central Africa Province (ISCAP) affiliate, operating in the DRC.

The attacks on the villages, according to some government officials, were similar to past actions by the ADF (The East African, April 19, 2018). The group reportedly received financial support from at least one IS financier (The East African, April 19, 2019).

Waleed Ahmed Zein, an ISIS financier was arrested in Kenya in July 2018 on terrorism financing charges, and placed under US sanctions in September 2018. Uganda officials claimed that Zein was in touch with ADF and one defector told the Congo Research Group (CRG) that a man with such a name had sent her money in Kampala.

Around the time, in August 2018, the late ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi hinted a possible ISIS link in DRC. It was until April and May 2019, however, when ISIS ran media claimed the first attack in the country. Later in 2019, al-Baghdadi formally recognized the existence of the province. (Modern Ghana, May 13, 2019).

Thus far, it is clear that the ADF under Baluku is not going away. In the group's 20 years of existence, the ADF has shifted ideologies from ethnic and secessionist, to Islamist. This has helped it find new alliances and recruits to

further its ability to survive. The group is one of the least understood terrorist organizations in the DRC, and therefore, a sharp focus on its activities and leadership is needed if Baluku is to be defeated.

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ARRESTED: Senior Islamic State Leader Abdul Nasser Qardash Highlights Internal Divisions

Rami Jameel

On May 20, Iraqi authorities announced that the arrest of Abdul Nasser Qardash, one of the most prominent leaders of the Islamic State (IS) ([Sky News Arabia](#), May 20).

He was the leader of IS' last stronghold in al-Baghuz in eastern Syria, located near the border with Iraq. Before that, he occupied senior positions within IS since the inception of the group. Although the Iraqi government claimed that the arrest was the result of an Iraqi operation, Qardash was in fact arrested a year earlier by the U.S. and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Syria. He was believed to have been handed over to the authorities of his native Iraq only recently ([Orient News](#), May 22).

He is the most senior IS member to be captured alive, fulfilling Baghdad's need to highlight progress in the face of a recent surge in IS activities across Iraq, and also in Syria.

Lifelong Salafist

Abdul Nasser Qardash has used several aliases throughout his long career within the jihadist movement, including Abu Abdul Rahman al-Shami. His real name, however, is Taha Abdul-Raheem Abdullah Bakr al-Ghsani. He is still widely known in IS circles as Hajji Abdul Nasser Qardash. He was born in 1967 in the town of Tal Afar in Ninawa province in northern Iraq near the borders with Syria and Turkey. He has a

degree in civil engineering. Qardash comes from the Turkmen ethnicity. Turkmen of Tal Afar in particular have played a significant role in the resurgence of IS under the leadership of its former leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (killed in a U.S. raid in northern Syria on October 2019) ([Al Jazeera](#), May 21).

Qardash is not to be confused with Abdullah Qardash, a.k.a. Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qureshi, who is believed to be the current leader of IS. No direct relation between the two men seem to exist, but they both come from the Turkmen community of Tal Afar. [1] The name Qardash in this article is in reference to Abdul Nasser, not Abdullah.

Qardash is a lifelong Salafist, and has been an adherent of the ideology since the 1990s when it was not possible to form political or armed groups during the regime of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. After the U.S.-led invasion of 2003, he became a member of the only Salafi-jihadist group that was then operational in Iraq, Ansar al-Islam. Ansar al-Islam was active in parts of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq that had been outside the control of the Hussein government since 1991 ([Al Arabiya](#), May 22).

After the Invasion

Qardash was first arrested by U.S. forces in 2005. He was reportedly sentenced to only 18 months in prison since he was not in a senior position in the insurgency at that time. He was released from Abu Ghraib prison in 2007. When al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) declared itself as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in October 2006, which is the direct predecessor of IS, he became a senior member. Qardash was appointed as the

wali (or local ruler) of the region of al-Jazeera in northwestern Iraq. In 2008, Qardash was arrested again, but was released the following year after managing to hide his identity. ISI was going through difficult times during this period as it suffered major blows at the hands of U.S. forces and Sunni fighters of the Sahwa awakening groups. The Sahwa groups turned against jihadists and were funded and supported by U.S. forces. The Sahwa groups were key to the success of the U.S. surge strategy between 2007-2008 (Al Arabiya, May 22).

When al-Baghdadi became the leader of ISI, Qardash secured a meeting with him and was supposed to be promoted to the position of *wali* of northern Iraq. Qardash's friend and patron, Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, who was currently holding that position, was about to be promoted to the position of *wali* of the whole of Iraq.

Qardash claims that he disagreed on policies and principles with al-Baghdadi, saying that he was against extremely violent and cruel actions by the organization. He might be exaggerating the degree of his disagreement with al-Baghdadi, but the idea of his promotion was dismissed after that meeting. Yet, he remained a well-known figure within the organization and a close friend of al-Turkmani, who was one of Baghdadi's chief lieutenants.

In Syria

As ISI gained control of more land in Syria after the 2011 uprising turned into a civil war, Qardash moved there to run the group's efforts in developing weapons and equipment. He was close to Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the man ISI sent to start its branch in Syria, al-Nusra Front,

and to Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the ISI spokesman.

With his strong ties to al-Turkmani, Qardash remained an asset to al-Baghdadi. In April 2013 al-Baghdadi's leadership faced its most serious internal challenge. Al-Julani refused to follow al-Baghdadi's decision to unify ISI and al-Nusra Front and form Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (IS). Qardash provided details after his arrest on that chapter in the history of IS and al-Nusra. The split was preceded by a plan to arrest al-Baghdadi and remove him from leadership. Abu Maria al-Qahtani, a prominent militant leader in al-Nusra, set in motion a plan to arrest al-Baghdadi, who was then on a visit to eastern Syria. The plan was aborted by al-Julani, who, despite his disagreement with al-Baghdadi, was not ready to make such an aggressive move. The split continued anyway and al-Nusra became al-Qaeda's branch in Syria.

A war between al-Nusra and IS followed, resulting in hundreds of fighters from both sides being killed. IS emerged victorious in most areas. The split by al-Nusra gave al-Baghdadi little choice of who to depend on. Qardash was one of the few senior members in Syria who did not join al-Nusra. He was immediately promoted to the position of *wali* of eastern Syria. Under his leadership, IS maintained its position in the face of al-Nusra's challenge despite the fact that the latter had greater potential appeal to Syrians. Al-Nusra was more openly dedicated to Syrian affairs and not to global jihad.

Part of IS' success against al-Nusra was due to Qardash's strategic planning. He decided to focus on sectarian issues and the grievances of Sunni populations in Iraq and Syria. He promoted IS discourse that focused on the

feelings of Sunnis directed against the Shia-led government of Iraq and the Alawaite domination of Syria under President Bashar al-Assad. He believed that those sectarian feelings superseded the nationality of Sunnis on both sides of the border. Some sources suggested that he was the one who lobbied the leadership for the idea of merging IS Iraqi and Syrian branches into one group.

The second pillar of his strategy confronted the economic deprivation of Sunnis, especially the youth. He dedicated financial resources to recruit angry Sunni youth, which gave IS the foot soldiers that helped the group extend its domination to Syria and Iraq (Making Policies, May 22).

Baghdadi's Entourage

Qardash attempted to draw a distinction between his views and those of his leader, al-Baghdadi. He has claimed that al-Baghdadi always relied on personal loyalty from his subordinates. This seems to have contributed to the early success of IS amid the complicated environment of the Syrian civil war, where multiple rebel groups operated. Before that it was also important for the groups' survival and later mass resurgence in Iraq, following setbacks resulting from the U.S. surge strategy in 2007-2008.

Qardash in a post-arrest interview, provided greater insight on another internal conflict inside IS between al-Baghdadi's leadership and the even more extremist faction of al-Ghulat. Al-Ghulat was a group led by a Tunisian IS member named Abu Jafa al-Hattab. He was a member of a smaller group of foreign fighters who joined IS after its inception and expansion

into Syria. The group's ideology stated that even if a person did not know about the 'real Islam' (which they claim to be Salafi-jihadism) and therefore remained misguided, he should still be punished by death. Furthermore, anyone who does not embrace and conduct that hardline ideology should also be condemned as a non-Muslim. That logic would open the possibility of condemning al-Baghdadi himself (Al Arabiya, May 22).

Another area of disagreement with al-Baghdadi was in media policy. Qardash claimed that Abu Muhammad Furkan, who was in charge of the media arms of IS, played a major role in shaping organization-wide policies. Qardash admits that Furkan's portrayal of the group's brutality was attractive to many jihadists around the world, but he considered it to be too vicious and against the spirit of Islam. However, Qardash still appreciated the effectiveness of Furkan's policy, called 'Electronic Jihad,' which prioritized sharing impactful, however brutal, acts on social media. It attracted followers from around the world.

As IS began suffering military retreats and losing territory, Qardash became even more important within the leadership. After the killing of al-Adnani (in a U.S. raid in Syria in 2016) and in the face of growing internal friction, al-Baghdadi appointed him chairman of the delegated committee, a leadership group within the organization, that he trusted and which he gave some of his authority into (24.ae, May 21).

Despite Qardash's claim that he did not agree with all al-Baghdadi policies he remained a senior leader of IS. Qardash was the leader of IS' last battle defending al-Baghuza in March 2019 (Middle East Online, March 14, 2019).

The New Caliph and the Future

As someone who knew both the former and current leaders of IS, Qardash contrasted their two characters in an interview. Despite his criticism of al-Baghdadi, he portrayed him as a decisive leader, while on the contrary, he said the new leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qureshi, is not so strict and prefers to take his time to make decisions. He does not necessarily think that al-Qureshi's qualities are bad. Qardash claimed that many of IS' bad decisions, especially those concerning executions, were taken hastily by al-Baghdadi under the influence of poor advisors. After his arrest, Qardash was vocal in expressing his frustration with the degree of influence those who were close to al-Baghdadi exerted on the IS leader's decisions.

Qardash seems to be open to the possibility that the current leader of IS, al-Qureshi, is not necessarily Abdullah Qardash, as has been speculated by some analysts. He could be Abu Saad al-Shimali who is also a senior member of IS, but he is from Syria. Thus far, the leaders of IS have been Iraqis and the leadership of the group became even more Iraqi-dominated under al-Baghdadi, who relied on personal contacts and confidants. It is therefore unlikely that al-Qureshi is a Syrian national, but Qardash's statement on the matter leaves that possibility open ([Making Policies](#), May 22).

During the period of the surge strategy in 2007-2008, Qardash indicated that IS worried most about the combination of Sunni anti-IS fighters of the Sahwa Awakening and U.S. support. In the anti-IS campaign in Iraq and Syria after 2014, the United States worked mostly with Shia and Kurdish forces. In light of

Qardash' revelations, future strategies to combat IS will need to look at the importance of including Sunni fighters in countering the IS insurgency.

Qardash pointed out that internal divisions within IS might hinder the leadership of the new caliph. A group of IS members from the Jazrawi clan from northern Iraq, who formed an influential block in IS under al-Baghdadi's leadership, have not been on good terms with al-Qureshi and they might represent a challenge to his leadership. Al-Baghdadi was ruthless in crushing all internal challengers, but he was in control of large territory and massive resources when he did that. His successor will most likely be working towards unifying the group, which is still under immense pressure.

Qardash also remembers the conclusion of al-Baghdadi after IS lost most of the territory it controlled in Iraq and Syria. The leader of IS told him that the continuity of the organization's activities and attacks—especially against the West—is even more important than controlling territory.

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Notes

[1] Tal Afar is a predominately Turkmen town but the Turkmen community in is divided between Shia Turkmen and Sunny Turkmen. When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took charge of IS Sunni Turkmen from Tal Afar became more instrumental in IS and its leadership. Examples are: Abdullah Qardash, Abdul Nasser Qardash and Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, who was a chief

lieutenant of Baghdadi and was killed in US airstrike in 2015.

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