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From Village Elder to Islamic State's 'Acting' Emir in the Philippines: Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan

John Foulkes

On July 10, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) announced that Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan, the leader of a faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) based in the Sulu Islands and acting emir of the Islamic State in East Asia (ISEA), was still alive and active. The statement, delivered by AFP Western Mindanao Command chief Lieutenant General Cirilo Sobejana, comes following initial reports that Sawadjaan was killed in a 30-minute-long firefight between ASG and Army Scout Rangers on Sulu Island ([Manila Bulletin](#), July 10; [Arab News](#), July 11). Sawadjaan is a long-time militant who has been operating in the Philippines for decades.

Sawadjaan is believed to have been born in Jolo, the capital of Sulu, to a poor family. He was originally employed as a lumberjack near the town of Patikul, a town from where he is still operating today. As a village elder, he later served

as a preacher at the local mosque, where he earned the title of *hatib*, or sermon leader. Sawadjaan later joined the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Sawadjaan's left the MNLF with his then-commander, Radulan Sahiron, to join ASG in 1992 ([Sunstar](#), February 22, 2019).

He began gaining notoriety in the early 2000s for his participation in the kidnapping of foreign nationals for ransom. This is a practice that ASG has historically relied upon for funding. Sawadjaan was involved in the kidnapping of an American citizen, Jeffrey Schilling in 2000. More famously, Sawadjaan's forces kidnapped a Norwegian, Filipino, and two Canadian nationals, from a resort in the southern Philippines on September 21, 2015. ASG beheaded the two Canadians were beheaded in April and June 2016, citing a lack of timely payment on the ransom ([Al Jazeera](#), September 17, 2016).

Sawadjaan's advancement in ASG and Islamic State came as a result of the Battle of Marawi, which ended in October 2017. The five-month-

long battle between the AFP and Islamic State affiliated militant groups—including ASG and other factions of local Islamist groups, including the Maute group, Ansar Khalifa Philippines, and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters—killed many of the organization’s senior leaders. This included Islamic States-Central’s (IS-Central) anointed emir for the regional affiliate, Isnlon Hapilon. Abu Dar, an ASG leader who survived the Marawi battle, is believed to have taken over Hapilon’s leadership position, before being killed himself in a gunfight with AFP on March 14, 2019 ([Straits Times](#), April 14, 2019; see [MLM](#), July 31, 2019). Abu Dar was the last of the leading organizers of the take-over of Marawi to be killed ([Straits Times](#), March 16, 2019).

Secretary of the Interior and Local Government Eduardo Año, remarked that, “I think Sawadjaan rose in rank because of seniority and there were no other leaders left. Almost everyone had been wiped out” ([Sunstar](#), February 22, 2019). Abu Dar had experience as a money courier with a proven ability to bring in foreign fighters to Marawi. Sawadjaan has also proven that he has connections to militant networks in Malaysia and Indonesia. His daughter is married to Amin Baco, a Malaysian militant leader who survived the fighting in Marawi and is influential among the Islamic State affiliated militant groups in the region ([SCMP](#), January 17, 2018).

Año further commented that Sawadjaan also likely rose to his leadership position since he commands a force of approximately 200 fighters, and has a geographic base in Patikul, Sulu from which to operate ([Sunstar](#), February 22, 2019).

IS-Central has not officially appointed Sawadjaan as emir of ISEA. However, a U.S.

Department of Defense report has labelled Sawadjaan as the ‘acting emir’ ([Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines Report](#), June 30, 2019). Filipino intelligence sources say that Sawadjaan had been recognized as the emir by IS-Central sometime in 2018, but no official announcement has been released by IS media groups confirming this ([Efe Agencia](#), February 7, 2019).

More recently, Sawadjaan was involved in planning two significant attacks that took place in Sulu in 2019. A double suicide bombing took place in a cathedral in Jolo, Sulu on January 27, 2019 killed 23 people, wounding 109. The Indonesian couple responsible for the bombing reportedly stayed with Sawadjaan’s ASG faction in Sulu, and the AFP labelled him as the “mastermind and financier” of the attack ([Rappler](#), July 23, 2019). On June 28, 2019, another pair of suicide bombers targeted an army counterterrorism unit brigade in the town of Indanan, killing eight and injuring 22. This was the first case of a Filipino national conducting a suicide bombing ([Arab News](#), July 11).

According to Zachary Abuza, a professor at the National War College and specialist in Southeast Asian security issues, the key connection between the local ASG and IS is Sawadjaan (see [MLM](#), July 31, 2019). Both the Jolo Cathedral bombing and the attack in Indanan were claimed by Islamic State, and were perpetrated by local ASG militants.

Sawadjaan’s forces have continued its low-intensity insurgency in Sulu since these bombings. On April 22, a nearly hour-long fight between ISEA-linked ASG militants and AFP forces near Patikul, Sulu resulted in the death of 11 Filipino soldiers and six militants. These

militants were part of Sawadjaan's faction and it is unknown if he took part in the skirmish or not; however, it is quite likely he played a role, or helped coordinate the planning for the attack ([Benar News](#), April 23).

The most recent gunfight that resulted in the mistaken reporting of Sawadjaan's death also took place in Patikul. Five militants were killed in the fight, and initial reporting indicated that Sawadjaan was buried by his fighters and nephew, Mundi Sawadjaan. However, he remains "very active" according to the AFP, although he is likely to have been injured in the fight ([Arab News](#), July 11). Since this clash, Sawadjaan's forces were allegedly responsible for an ambush on an AFP battalion near Patikul on July 31, resulting in the deaths of three soldiers and six militants ([Benar News](#), July 31).

Sawadjaan has seemingly filled a leadership vacuum created by the death of senior leadership during the Battle of Marawi and in subsequent operations. He has been involved in insurgent fighting for decades, and has a proven reach into Indonesia and Malaysia, from where he has recruited fighters and brought them to Sulu for training. Had Sawadjaan been killed, it would have been disruptive to the operations of ISEA. His survival means that he can bring his extensive experience and regional connections to bear in continuing the Islamist insurgency in the Philippines. Sawadjaan will likely continue to recruit foreign fighters, and organize and perpetuate kidnappings for ransom, which has seen an uptick since 2018, and plan attacks against the AFP, the Filipino government, and other institutions ([Benar News](#), July 29).

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A Brief Overview of Abu Muhammad al-Masri: the Next in Line to Lead al-Qaeda

Shan A. Zain

On June 14, a U.S. drone strike in Syria's Idlib province killed Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni, a top al-Qaeda figure who was a commander of al-Qaeda affiliate Hurras al-Din. The death of al-Urduni, a.k.a. Khalid al-Aruri, follows those of prominent al-Qaeda leaders Abu al-Khayr al-Masri and Sari Shihab (a.k.a. Khallad Mohandis), who were killed in Syria in 2017 and 2019, respectively. All three took on leading roles in jihad following their release from Iranian detention in 2015 ([Enab Baladi](#), June 15; [Al-Arabiya](#), June 16).

These high-profile deaths have drawn attention to Abu Muhammad al-Masri and Sayf al-Adel, the two remaining al-Qaeda heavyweights who were also released by Iran, but chose to stay in the country. Among them, al-Masri has been widely expected to succeed the allegedly ailing leader of al-Qaeda Ayman al-Zawahri. His vast experience in jihad and relations with al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden has put him at the top of the group's hierarchy.

Blood Ties with Jihadist Figures

Abu Muhammad al-Masri, a.k.a. Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, was born on June 6, 1963 in Egypt's Gharbiya governorate. Before beginning his jihadist career, he served in the Egyptian army and played professional soccer for the Ghazl El-Mahalla club in the

Egyptian Premier League (Al-Arabiya, May 20).

Al-Masri is one of the founders of al-Qaeda and has served the group in various roles ranging from operative commander to member of the Shura council, its decision-making body. An expert in manufacturing explosives, al-Masri led the security committee of al-Qaeda for a significant period of time. He was given the responsibility of training new militants at al-Qaeda's al-Faruq camp in Afghanistan. While in Afghanistan, he maintained close contact with the late Taliban founder Mullah Omar (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, May 17, 2003).

Sometime in 2005, Hamza bin Laden, the son of Osama bin Laden, married al-Masri's daughter Maryam while they were detained in Iran. Another of his daughters is married to a son of Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, the al-Qaeda veteran who served as the second-in-command of al-Qaeda until his death in 2017. Abu Muhammad al-Masri himself is married to the daughter of Ahmad Salama Mabruk, a.k.a. Abu Faraj al-Masri, another senior al-Qaeda commander who was killed in Syria in 2016 (Euro Times, December 10, 2017; Al-Arabiya, August 7, 2018).

The U.S. government announced a \$10 million bounty for information on al-Masri for his role in the 1998 bombings of the American embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Early Years in Command

Al-Masri's jihadist career began when he joined hundreds of Arab fighters who migrated to Afghanistan to wage jihad against the Soviet occupation. Following the Soviet withdrawal, al-Masri, unlike many jihadists, chose to remain in the country and became a core member of al-Qaeda when it was formed by Osama bin Laden in 1988.

He was later sent to the Somali capital Mogadishu in 1991 after al-Qaeda moved its base from Afghanistan to Sudan. Al-Masri was tasked with encouraging the fighters loyal to the warlord Mohammed Farah Aideed to attack U.S. forces. The militia that shot down two Black Hawk helicopters over Mogadishu in 1993 were reportedly trained by al-Masri's team.

Al-Masri quickly rose to a leadership role within al-Qaeda and played a pivotal part in planning and coordinating ground operations. His military skills earned him the leadership of al-Qaeda's East African wing, following the death of Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri in a ferry accident in 1996 (Akhbar al-Aan, August 5, 2019).

Al-Masri's biggest moment in Africa came in 1998 when he planned and oversaw the attacks against the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salam, which killed over 200 people. A day before the attacks, al-Masri returned to Afghanistan and began preparing the ground for the 9/11 attack (Al-Arabiya, August 7, 2018).

Abu Muhammad al-Masri, along with Sayf al-Adel, is credited with training the planes' hijackers in explosives. However, reports

suggest al-Masri was not fully supportive of such a large-scale operation because he feared it would attract a strong U.S. response and lead to the group's collapse ([24.ae](#), December 10, 2017).

Another high-profile attack in which al-Masri reportedly played a crucial role is al-Qaeda suicide bombings on expatriate residential compounds in Riyadh in 2003. Investigations have revealed the close association of al-Masri with Ali Abdul Rahman al-Ghamdi (a.k.a. Abu Bakr al-Azdi), the key mastermind of the attack and an al-Qaeda operative with experience in Afghanistan ([Al-Sharq al-Awsat](#), May, 17)

Detention in Iran and Renewed Role in Syria

As al-Masri feared, the 9/11 attacks changed the course of history for himself and al-Qaeda. As the Taliban regime collapsed, al-Masri and his family reluctantly fled Afghanistan and sought refuge in Iran. For some time, he lived in the city of Shiraz, but he was arrested along with other al-Qaeda figures in 2003 ([FBI](#), March 1, 2013).

In 2015, in a major prisoner swap deal with al-Qaeda in Yemen (AQAP), Iran released five al-Qaeda veterans. Of them, Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni, Jordanian [Abu Khallad al-Muhandis](#), and Egyptian Abu al-Khayr al-Masri—all to be killed in future operations—traveled to Syria while al-Masri and Sayf al-Adl remained in Iran ([Al-Sharq al-Awsat](#), 18 September, 2015).

Despite their absence from Syria, both al-Masri and al-Adel appear to have played a significant role in the day-to-day running of al-Qaeda in the country. In 2016, divisions emerged over the rebranding of Nusra Front—the predecessor of Hayat Tahrir Sham (HTS)—as Jabhat Fatah Sham (JFS). While Khalid al-Aruri and Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, al-Zawahiri's senior representatives in Syria, authorized the rebranding, the move was eventually rejected by al-Zawahiri on the advice of al-Masri and al-Adel ([Jihad Intel](#), December 10, 2017).

This incident not only sheds light on the duo's indispensable role in al-Qaeda's decision-making, but it also suggests they are able to maintain direct contact with jihadists in Syria. Additionally, in October 2017, Khalid al-Aruri revealed that both al-Masri and al-Adel were not under detention in Iran, but rather had freedom of movement (Telegram, October 19, 2017; [Jihadica](#), October 24, 2017)

The speculation about the jihadists' fresh engagement in Syria was confirmed in a UN report that said al-Masri and al-Adel had been playing crucial roles in Syria and helping al-Zawahiri manage al-Qaeda's global network. "Ayman al-Zawahiri, partly through the agency of senior al-Qaida leadership figures based in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Abu Muhammad al-Masri and Sayf al-Adel, has been able to exert influence on the situation in north-western Syrian Arab Republic," the report notes ([United Nations](#), July 27, 2018).

First in Line to Lead al-Qaeda

Al-Masri's decades-long jihadist career and his blood relations with senior al-Qaeda figures have made him the most likely figure to succeed the current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. His name has been repeatedly featured in debates about al-Qaeda succession amid reports of the deteriorating health condition of al-Zawahiri and the recent killing of key al-Qaeda figures including Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, the son-in-law of bin Laden and al-Qaeda's deputy leader ([Al-Arabiya](#), May 20; [Jihadica](#), October 24, 2017).

Internal al-Qaeda documents have revealed that bin Laden had explicitly named Abu al-Khayr, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, Sayf al-Adel and Nasir al-Wuhaishi, in that order, to lead the group. Reports also indicate that al-Zawahiri had asked al-Qaeda's Shura council to pledge allegiance to al-Masri following the killing of al-Khayr ([24.ae](#), December 14, 2017; [Akhbar al-Aan](#), August 5, 2019).

Al-Qaeda has recently suffered back-to-back losses of high-profile commanders in Afghanistan and Syria. That has coincided with the group's failure to gain a foothold in Syria's jihadist landscape despite forging alliances with various groups. More than ever, al-Qaeda would now be relying on the vast experience and the leadership of its remaining veteran commanders, such as al-Masri, in order to revive its fortunes in the Middle East and elsewhere.

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Igor Strelkov-Girkin: The Rise and Fall of the Former Donetsk Minister of Defense

Sergey Sukhankin

Introduction

On June 25, the former Minister of Defense of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) Igor Strelkov-Girkin (born December, 17 1970) admitted that “instead of bringing freedom to Donbass, I brought destruction and a six-years` war. Yet, I have no regrets about my actions” ([Pr.kg](#), June 25). He added that instead of becoming a representative of the Russian world, the DPR and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) have been turned into a “trash bin” ([Rosbalt.ru](#), July 5). Strelkov-Girkin has been accused by the Ukrainian government of war crimes and is allegedly co-responsible for the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 on July 17, 2014 ([Gp.gov.ua](#), June 16; [Unian.net](#), July 3). This article seeks to examine the profile of Strelkov-Girkin and his evolution from a man who actively participated in the annexation of Crimea to *de facto* starting the bloody conflict in southeastern Ukraine.

Early Career: From Bosnia to Crimea

A historian by training, Strelkov-Girkin developed a passion for the White movement and pre-1917 Imperial Russia—its ideology, political model and mode of governance—through participation in various historical reenactments since 1989 in Russia and Ukraine

([Russdom.ru](#), July 2014). Monarchist sentiments and imperial nationalism motivated Strelkov-Girkin to travel to Bosnia, where he fought on the Serbian side with the 2nd Regiment of the Black Sea Cossacks Host ([Aif.ru](#), June 4). Later, between November 1992 and March 1993, he fought in Višegrad and Priboj in the Bosnian Serb Army, where, according to some local sources, he participated in war crimes ([Klix.ba](#), July 25, 2014; [Lib.ru](#), accessed July 5).

Upon completion of his mission in the Balkans and following his return to Russia, Strelkov-Girkin was spotted and recruited by Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB). Between 1998 and 2005, he served in Dagestan and Chechnya ([Echo.msk.ru](#), May 21, 2014). According to some sources, including an anonymous member of the FSB, as a part of his service, Strelkov-Girkin monitored developments in Ukraine. Allegedly, this assignment had a dramatic impact on his vision of that country, since he “[W]ould constantly speak of the Banderaites permeating Moscow [...] Ukrainian libraries and other agencies [in Russia]” ([Nvo.ng.ru](#), December 19, 2014). [1]

After retiring from the FSB in 2013 with the rank of colonel, he was employed as the head of security of the Marshall-Kapital Foundation, which belonged to Konstantin ‘the Orthodox oligarch’ Malofeev. The same foundation kept Alexander Borodai, the would-be prime minister of the DPR, on its payroll ([Vedomosti.ru](#), May 16, 2014). Employed by Malofeev, Strelkov-Girkin was given a task of paramount importance: under the pretext of ensuring the secure transportation of the Gift of the Magi relic to Crimea and Kyiv in early January 2014, he performed a reconnaissance mission, collecting valuable intelligence that would be

used during the annexation of Crimea between February and March 2014 (see [War by Other Means](#), September 3, 2019). Strelkov-Girkin was on the peninsula during the annexation, from where he would travel to Donbass to stir instability and pursue the realization of the Novorossiia geopolitical project. [2]

Donbass: The Rise and Fall of Strelkov-Girkin

On April 11-12, 2014, Strelkov-Girkin, accompanied by 52 militants, entered the eastern Ukrainian city of Sloviansk and captured administrative buildings there ([Vesti.ua](#), April 12, 2014). Following the “referendum” on “self-determination of the DPR” on May 12, he assumed the role of the DPR’s defense minister and the head of its Security Council. At this juncture, two details are noteworthy. First, despite the claims to the contrary actively disseminated by Russian disinformation outlets, Strelkov-Girkin issued a video statement on May 7 accusing locals of cowardice, claiming that only external help from Russia was keeping the DPR afloat ([Korrespondent.net](#), May 17, 2014). Secondly, unlike other non-state actors—such as the Wagner Group—Strelkov-Girkin, whose criminal role should not be downplayed, attempted to maintain some semblance of discipline. He sometimes punished his own accomplices/subordinates, including with the death penalty, for “pillage and indecent behavior” ([YouTube](#), May 18).

The Ukrainian chapter of Strelkov-Girkin’s career did not last long. On July 5, his forces abandoned Sloviansk for Kramatorsk in order to later move to Donetsk ([Ria.ru](#), July 5, 2014). This was condemned by many Russian conservative nationalists, who called it treasonous. Strelkov-

Girkin explained this move by citing a lack of resources and the clear unwillingness of Moscow to provide necessary help (Lenta.ru, November 13, 2014). On August 14, Strelkov-Girkin stepped down from his position and temporarily went to Moscow, never to return to Donetsk. From a military-strategic point of view, his resignation became an important milestone in the Ukrainian conflict, signifying a strengthening of Kremlin control that was reflected in two ways.

First, the semi-professional voluntary formations that played an important role in April-July 2014 in both the DPR and LPR were replaced by paramilitary forces with army-type command and control (C2) structures. These new forces were staffed and led by military professionals, including from the Wagner Group, and regular Russian armed forces deployed on the Ukrainian national border.

Second, a trend emerged in which the first batch of DPR/LPR leaders were replaced (frequently accompanied by physical elimination) with docile Kremlin-appointed figures (Informnapalm.org, January 10, 2015). In effect, over the course of six months, five of the most prominent militant leaders (in the LPR and DPR) were assassinated. Many—including Strelkov-Girkin—believe that their elimination was carried out by mercenaries from the Wagner Group (YouTube, February 10, 2017; Svoboda.org, February 8, 2017). At this juncture, the fact that Strelkov-Girkin left Donbass unharmed could be a result of the power and influence of his Russian patrons. Aside from the already mentioned Malofeev, the militant is said to have been in direct contact with Sergey Glazyev, an adviser to Putin and a key figure in the Eurasian Economic Union (Khpg.org, February 26, 2019). Due to the fact

that Glazyev's vision of Ukraine, its role and peace settlement policies were outweighed by the arguments of Vladislav Surkov—Putin's personal advisor on relationships with Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Ukraine—and Strelkov-Girkin was replaced by Borodai, who was handpicked by Moscow (Snob.ru, October 5, 2015). Thus, Strelkov-Girkin was not physically liquidated, unlike many others, and was allowed to abandon Donbass safely only because of his highly-positioned protégés.

Political Career: From Hero to Zero?

The first several months that followed Strelkov-Girkin's return to Russia became his brightest, albeit short-lived, hour of triumph. According to many Russian sources, the former militant leader hoped to assume a position within the Russian regime, *de facto* proclaiming his loyalty to Putin and urging to strengthen actions against a so-called “fifth column” (Lenta.ru, September 11, 2014). Later, he made it quite clear that he was hoping to become a part of the “system,” declaring his readiness to “[t]ake any part in defense of the country” (Kolokolrussia.ru, June 25, 2015). Those sentiments may have been deliberately influenced from above, where Strelkov-Girkin was thought to be a tool against the opposition to the Russian ruling class. In 2014, Strelkov-Girkin published a long essay titled “Putin's decade has brought back Russia's hope for a rebirth” (Front-novorossii.ru, accessed July 4, 2020). This piece was specifically aimed against the exiled Russian oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky. In 2014, Strelkov-Girkin launched a popular movement, called “Novorossiia,” for the purpose of delivering humanitarian aid and munitions to the DPR/LPR, which eventually contributed to his marginalization.

The movement became *de facto* superfluous following the emergence of the Union of Donbass Volunteers (UDV) movement on August 27, 2015. The UDV is headed by Borodai, has far greater resources and enjoys the protection of Surkov (Informnapalm.org, April 30, 2017). These developments led Strelkov-Girkin to break decisively with his former conformist rhetoric toward Putin's regime and signaled his departure to radical opposition. This course was openly manifested during January-October 2016, when the "Committee of January 25" (later transformed into the All-Russian National Movement) was launched (Kommersant.ru, October 17, 2016). The entity—officially claiming to be a nationalist movement— assembled under its umbrella the most radical and extreme right-wing and neo-nationalist political forces in Russia. The group openly declared its opposition to Putin and simultaneously claimed to be the sole neo-imperial nationalist force in Russian society (Novorossia.pro, May 28, 2016).

The emergence of the Committee of January 25 has had mixed results. On the one hand, its formation resulted in a brief exhilaration among Russian imperial nationalists, who perceived "nationalism [...] as a huge modernization force" (Sputnikpogrom.com, June 6, 2016). At the same time, the group increased its anti-Putin rhetoric, condemning Russia's involvement in Syria and accusing the ruling elites of the "betrayal of [the] Novorossiya" project, which further marginalized Strelkov-Girkin and his associates (Zona.media, July 4, 2016). The sympathies of war veterans and military-patriotic circles also increasingly drifted toward the UDV as the sole representative of the Russian "volunteers" movement.

By 2019, Strelkov-Girkin seemed to have soured relationships even with his (former) patrons/benefactors. On March 9, 2019, he put his medal for the reunification with Crimea up for auction. According to the former DPR military leader, "[t]his medal is not a state-issued piece. It was presented to me by Malofeev during spring 2014 – even before the Donbass campaign. I am selling it because of economic predicaments I am having [...] I have never revered this medal since it a) was unofficial; b) was not earned in combat; c) has a face [Vladimir Putin] on it, which I have never – with the exception of a very brief period in 2014 – respected; and since 2015, I have been openly disrespecting this person" (YouTube, May 18). The medal was ultimately sold in 2020. The lot description said the item was "a non-state decoration issued by the Foundation of Saint Basil the Great" (Rbc.ru, May 19). [3]

Conclusion

In the first decade following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia witnessed the emergence of so-called "*okopnyje generali*" (trench generals)—figures with mounting political ambitions and considerable military experience gained in Afghanistan and other regional conflicts. [4] Usually, their fates were tragic: brief popularity and political elevation was followed by oblivion and/or a mysterious death. Strelkov-Girkin occupies a special place among these individuals: instead of elements of neo-Bonapartism—equally feared by both the Soviet and Russian political leadership – he never openly declared his ambitions for high power, following a pattern of romanticism (revolving around so-called civic nationalism) established by Giuseppe Garibaldi, the Italian nationalist, in the 19th century. Even though Strelkov-Girkin (and

people like him) does not pose any immediate threat to Russian ruling elites, his image, principles, and modus operandi could be of concern in the future, if and when Russia experiences turbulent times.

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Notes

[1] In Russian parlance “Banderaites” (*banderovtsi*) are followers of the far-right ideology and supporters of the ideology of Ukrainian ultranationalist Stepan Bandera (1909-1959)

[2] Novorossiia (literally “New Russia”) – a concept revived by Russian imperial nationalists, stating that southeastern Ukraine (the Odessa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, and Crimean oblasts) should be a part of Russia.

[3] The foundation was created in 2007 in Moscow (coinciding with the emergence of the Russian World Foundation). According to some French sources (Canal+ among others), it sponsored Marine Le Pen (the National Rally political party) between 2014 and 2015 (Rfi.fr, November 3, 2015).

[4] The most notable personalities include Alexander Lebed, Boris Gromov, Lev Rokhlin, Vladimir Shamanov, Viktor Kazantsev, Gennady Troshev.

Who's Who in the GNA Military Leadership in Libya

Dario Cristiani

The military offensive launched by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar in April 2019 to conquer western Libya has failed (see [TM](#), April 5, 2019). For months, Haftar and his forces enjoyed a clear strategic advantage: more fighters, more mercenaries, more external support, and more significant financial resources. This advantage was particularly apparent in the period between September and November 2019, the moment in which Russian Wagner mercenaries entered the conflict on the side of Haftar. However, despite this distinct advantage, the offensive failed.

This failure does not mean that the Libyan civil war is over. As the country is approaching ten years since the outbreak of its revolution-turned-civil-war (come February 17), the underlying causes of domestic chaos and instability are yet to be addressed. Notably, what was a genuinely domestic uprising—of course, favored by the broader regional revolutionary momentum triggered by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, but still a Libyan revolution by Libyans—was progressively hijacked by foreign forces that started dictating the agenda, limiting Libyan agency and making its civil war a truly, yet opaquely, internationalized conflict.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Russia, France, and Saudi Arabia, all backed Haftar's forces, although never officially. The Government of National Accord (GNA) became more and more reliant on the support of Turkey and, although less evident, of Qatar. The Turkish intervention had a significant impact on

the conflict for several reasons. Yet, a largely overlooked aspect remains: the Turkish military assistance allowed the GNA-aligned forces to become more organized and productive than ever before. From November 2019 onward, maybe for the first time since the beginning of the conflict pitting Haftar against groups in the west, the western forces did not appear to be a bunch of disorganized local militias, but increasingly part of a more organized, vertical structure, in which the more formal military component was becoming increasingly significant.

Who's Who in the GNA Military Leadership?

For years, the LNA had a media advantage in presenting itself as the group that was closer to being a real national army in Libya. This was a significant obsession for Haftar, and the presence of many former members of the Gaddafi regime in its ranks helped support this image. In addition, LNA propaganda stressed this element, although the reality was much more nuanced, as many irregular militias were fighting alongside Haftar's forces. The GNA side, instead, had often been perceived as being composed of—or overly dependent on—irregular militias. This reality has changed over the past two years. In February 2019, the GNA appointed Lieutenant General Mohammed al-Sharif as the new Chief of Staff of the Libyan Army. He replaced Brigadier General Abdelrahman al-Taweel, who had pro-Haftar sympathies ([Arabi 21](#), July 25). Al-Taweel tried to resist orders coming from the GNA. GNA Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj ended his military career in response ([The Libya Observer](#), March 14, 2019). Born in 1960 in Waddan, in the Jufra Governorate, central Libya, al-Sharif graduated from the military college in

Tripoli. Al-Sharif participated in two crucial Libyan military expeditions in the 1980s: first in Lebanon and then in Chad. In the latter, he worked alongside Khalifa Haftar ([El Manassa](#), February 14, 2019).

From a political and media perspective the most critical element in the GNA military leadership, and possibly the most crucial leader in the defense of Tripoli, is indisputably Major General Osama al-Juwaili. [1] Al-Juwaili is a key leader from the town of Zintan. Born in 1961, he graduated from the military college and worked in the army until 1999, before leaving and joining the public sector as a teacher. As the revolution broke out in February 2011, he immediately joined the rebel forces, and soon became head of the Zintan military council ([Afrigatenews](#), April 5, 2019).

Zintan is a town of roughly 50,000 people in the Nafusa Mountains in western Libya. Zintan's relationship with Gaddafi's regime has always been unstable, and this explains why locals swiftly and enthusiastically joined the 2011 revolution. The charismatic founder of the Zintan militia, Muhammad Ali Madani, was killed by loyalist forces on May 1, 2011 (see [Hot Issue](#), January 19, 2012). Zintanis, and al-Juwaili specifically, were responsible for arresting the fugitive Saif al-Islam Gaddafi in southern Libya while he was attempting to flee to Niger ([Jeune Afrique](#), November 20, 2011).

Over the years, al-Juwaili also emerged as a keen political negotiator. For instance, his mediation was crucial in ending the feud between the Zintan Military Council and the Misrata Military Council, who reconciled after years of trouble and clashes. Ending this conflict represented a vital step in strengthening the

GNA ([Al-Jazeera](#), July 8). Since the formation of the GNA in 2015, al-Juwaili has served as a senior commander, but later became the commander of the Western Military Zone in 2017. On April 6, 2019, he became the commander of the joint operations room, created by al-Sarraj, to coordinate military operations since the start of the 2019 western Libya offensive. He is quite popular among the population that makes up western Libya. Several Facebook fan pages are dedicated to him, with some having as many as 70,000 likes ([Facebook](#), February 24, 2018).

Another significant component of the GNA military leadership is General Mohamed Ali Ahmad al-Haddad. Born in Misrata in 1967, he graduated from the military college in 1987. He was one of the first Misratan officers to join the revolution and leave the Gaddafi regime in February 2011. He soon became one of the leaders of the Halbus Brigade. In June 2017, the Presidential Council made him the commander of the Central Military Region ([Al-Marsad](#), June 4, 2017). In August 2018, he was also responsible for supervising the ceasefire and disengagement arrangements in Tripoli as the conflict between western Libyan militias erupted. In September, al-Haddad was kidnapped at the end of a military meeting, and was later found alive in the Karzaz area in Misrata ([Afrigatenews](#), September 1, 2018).

As the GNA forces are now trying to push eastward, aiming at reconquering Sirte, Jufra, and the so-called Oil Crescent, the military leader charged with this task is Brigadier Ibrahim Bayt al-Ma. Also from Misrata, he was appointed commander of the Sirte-Jufra Liberation Operations Room earlier this year. Earlier, he was the head of military intelligence

for the Central Region and Misrata military council spokesman. As Egypt threatened to intervene militarily in Libya, he made clear this will not stop the GNA forces from trying to regain control of as much Libyan territory as possible ([Libya Al-Ahrar TV](#), June 27).

Other key players in the GNA-aligned military forces are Major General Abdelbasit Marwan, who has been the commander of the Tripoli Military district since March 2016, and Colonel Mohamed Hassan Gununu, the current spokesperson for the GNA Libyan Army, who is from Misrata as well. Interestingly, the former was photographed together with the leader of the Rada militia (the Special Deterrence Forces), the Islamist Abdelrauf Kara, proof that drawing clear boundaries between military players and militias in Libya remains complicated.

From Misrata to Ankara

Misratans clearly dominate the bloc that defended Tripoli from Haftar. Fathi Bashagha, the GNA Interior Minister, is also from Misrata (see [MLM](#), June 4, 2019). He has been active in organizing the resistance against Haftar and is the actual driver in deepening the GNA's relationship with Turkey. This was evident as Bashagha first took office in late 2018, when he called upon the GNA to further security cooperation with Turkey ([Al-Ayam](#), December 24, 2018). Immediately after the beginning of Haftar's military offensive against western Libya, Bashagha went to Turkey, leading a high-level security delegation that included the head of the State Council, Khaled al-Mishri—another crucial pro-Turkey player in Libya—and military leaders such as al-Juwaili and Marwan, reiterating the need to enhance security

cooperation with Ankara ([The Libya Observer](#), April 30, 2019).

Turkish support has gone through several phases. Ankara had been providing drones and military assistance since the conflict started. Between September and November, Turkey, frustrated with the GNA, began de-escalating, and became more focused on tensions in its immediate neighborhood—specifically, in Syria. This trend reversed swiftly on November 27, when Ankara and Tripoli signed two Memorandums of Understanding (MoU), one on military cooperation and the other on the delimitation of the respective Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and maritime boundaries in the eastern Mediterranean. These MoUs were signed when the military pressure on the GNA was becoming unsustainable, and the perception was that Tripoli could fall soon. Notably, Turkey was the first country to openly admit to intervening in Libya. Its intervention proved to be extremely efficient in shifting the tide of the conflict. The arrival of Syrian Turkmen militants fighting alongside GNA-aligned militias proved to be fundamental, despite the inevitable tensions between Libyan and foreign fighters. The military hardware and capacity that Turkey provided were crucial as well.

Another element, however, was largely overlooked: Turkish help also allowed the GNA to become a more effective military actor in its own right. Indeed, the Turkish role in supporting the GNA militarily was crucial, not only in terms of material support, but more broadly in helping the GNA reorganize its military structure. For years, there was a misleading perception that the conflict was pitting a more or less organized, quasi-national army, such as Haftar's Libyan National Army, against a bunch of disorganized

and reckless militias. The latter was true to a certain extent, but the situation has changed substantially over the past year. As for the former, Haftar's propaganda machine was extremely efficient in promoting the image of the LNA as a proper army, yet the reality was much more nuanced, as several irregular militias were—and are—working alongside Haftar. The Turkish-GNA is reinforcing the western Libyan forces, and defense cooperation is crucial. The GNA Undersecretary of the Ministry of Defense, Salah al-Namroush, confirmed that Turkey would continue supporting the GNA, stressing that coordination in the areas of training and redevelopment will deepen ([The Libya Observer](#), July 4). The meetings of Bashagha and al-Namroush with their Turkish and Qatari counterparts in July 2020 somehow sealed this alliance between the GNA and Turkey, supported by Qatar in the background.

Conclusion

Haftar's military offensive in April 2019 presented the GNA with a strategic dilemma. To survive politically, the GNA had to build a more productive, organized, and less chaotic military force. Indeed, the GNA managed to do so, despite many difficulties, with the essential support of Turkey. This is one of the many strategic paradoxes of Haftar's military operation in western Libya: he not only strengthened the cohesion among several militias that, until his military offensive, were primarily fighting between themselves, but forced the GNA to build a more effective, regular and organized fighting force (see [MLM](#), October 4, 2018). The crucial players in this context are Lieutenant General Mohammed al-Sharif, Major General Osama al-Juwaili, General Mohamed Ali Ahmad al-Haddad, and Brigadier Ibrahim Bayt al-Ma.

An analysis of the GNA military leadership shows how Misratans played a crucial role in the defense of Tripoli. However, the most popular of these figures is al-Juwaili, the great architect of the peace between Zintan and Misrata. This greater military efficiency built over the past year and a half in the GNA is a crucial element in explaining its increased military success and the failure of Haftar's military campaign in western Libya.

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Notes

[1] The Jamestown Foundation wrote his full biography in 2012, when he was Minister of Defense in the government of Abdurrahim el-Keib, then Libya's interim Prime Minister (see [MLM](#), July 2012).

Abdelmalek Droukdel and Boko Haram: A Post-Mortem Analysis on the AQIM Leader's Ties to the Nigerian Terrorist Group

Jacob Zenn

Abdelmalek Droukdel (a.k.a. Abu Musab Abdel Wadud) was the leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) since 2006—or since 2004, if his stint leading AQIM's predecessor, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), is included. His death was announced on June 11, and heralded the end of an era. He was killed in a raid by French special forces in Talhandak, Mali, near the Algerian border. Droukdel was the longest-serving leader of any major jihadist group, having overseen not only the GSPC's affiliation with al-Qaeda in 2006, but also AQIM's expansion from Algeria into the Sahel and northern Nigeria. The jihad in the Sahel and Nigeria has far exceeded the intensity of the jihad in Algeria itself.

One of the ironies of Droukdel's career is that while AQIM was formed to wage jihad in Algeria, it did not find unprecedented success there, but in countries further south. Droukdel was also overshadowed by more charismatic AQIM-allied jihadists in the Sahel like Mokhtar Belmokhtar or AQIM's highest-ranked Sahel-based brigade leader, Abu Zeid, whose kidnappings netted AQIM tens of millions of dollars. Nevertheless, although Droukdel may have appeared aloof toward AQIM's expansion into the Sahel compared to other commanders—such as Belmokhtar and Abu Zeid, who were actually based in the region—his record of supporting Nigerian jihadists in Boko Haram is

often overlooked. When the Nigerians sought to launch their jihad in 2009, Droukdel provided strategic leadership and acceded to all their requests.

This post-mortem analysis of Droukdel discusses his support for Boko Haram and his delegating the Nigeria portfolio to other commanders, including Abu Zeid, who were closer to the action in Nigeria from their Malian bases than Droukdel was from his Algerian base. This would be the same base from which he traveled into northern Mali before the U.S.-assisted French special operation that killed him two months ago ([France24](#), June 5). The picture of Droukdel that emerges from this profile is not of a leader who was aloof to Nigeria or the Sahel, but one who was committed primarily to jihad in Algeria and understood his limitations in those regions. Therefore, Droukdel empowered others, including Abu Zeid, to extend the jihad as far as Nigeria.

Initial GSPC Leadership Contacts with Nigerians

Droukdel took over leadership of the GSPC in August 2004 when his predecessor, Nabil Sahrawi (a.k.a. Abu Ibrahim Mustapha), was killed in an Algerian counter-terrorism operation. Sahrawi himself had some interest in Nigeria because he passed messages to al-Qaeda member Ibrahim Harun. Harun was a Saudi citizen from the Nigerian Hausa diaspora, and was deployed by al-Qaeda to Nigeria in August 2003 ([U.S. E.D.N.Y.](#) 2017). At the same time, GSPC members were also operating in Nigeria, so it was unsurprising that Sahrawi would utilize them to convey messages to Harun ([Jeune Afrique](#), May 10, 2004). Harun then sent a Boko Haram (then called “Nigerian Taliban”) member

to Pakistan to transfer Sahrawi's messages to al-Qaeda Central (Refworld.org, April 30, 2008).

After Sahrawi's death, few direct contacts existed between the GSPC and Boko Haram, which itself was in disarray after a December 2003 crackdown on the group by security forces. However, there were still dozens of Nigerians, including some from Boko Haram and some independent of the group, who trained with the GSPC (Agence France-Presse, June 21, 2012). This is why Droukdel mentioned Nigerians being trained by AQIM in a 2008 interview with the *New York Times* (New York Times, July 1, 2008). Droukdel's interview occurred around one year after he himself formalized the GSPC's affiliation with al-Qaeda and AQIM's formation by pledging loyalty to Osama bin Laden, which was accepted by Ayman al-Zawahiri in a video interview (Paldf.net, September 14, 2006; Al-Sahab, September 11, 2006).

Droukdel and Boko Haram's Jihad

Droukdel was forced to react directly to the jihadist situation in Nigeria after Nigerian security forces killed Boko Haram leader Muhammed Yusuf and several hundred followers in July 2009. This was the second major crackdown on the group. After this, Yusuf's deputy, Abubakar Shekau, became the new Boko Haram leader and sent three emissaries to meet Abu Zeid in AQIM camps in Mali, including Khalid al-Barnawi, who would later form the Ansaru faction that opposed Shekau's ruthlessness in killing Muslim civilians (al-Andalus, April 2017).

In mid-August 2009, Abu Zeid wrote Droukdel to discuss the meetings he had with Shekau's "delegation" and explained to Droukdel that

they requested arms, finances and weapons in order to wage jihad in Nigeria. However, Abu Zeid also noted Khalid al-Barnawi and his co-fighters previously lived with him in the Mali-Niger border region before 2009 and that Boko Haram planned to wage guerrilla warfare once it had recovered from the July 2009 crackdown (al-Andalus, April 2017).

Droukdel was evidently informed about the situation in Nigeria as even before Abu Zeid's letter reached him, he released a statement through AQIM's al-Andalus media agency condemning the "evil Christian Nigerian army" that "brutally killed around 800 Muslims" in the July 2009 clashes, while also honoring Muhammed Yusuf as a "martyr" (al-Andalus, August 20, 2009). This demonstrated that Droukdel, either through his deputies or his own personal monitoring of the situation in Nigeria, was aware of Muhammed Yusuf and thought highly of him.

Nevertheless, Droukdel's emphasis on blaming Christians for the crackdown on Boko Haram when Nigerian's president and local leaders who authorized the move were Muslims indicated Droukdel's lack of knowledge of Nigeria. Alternatively, Droukdel may simply have been interested in Boko Haram responding by attacking Christians and sparing Muslims, whose support the group would need to wage jihad. It is notable, therefore, that AQIM approved of Ansaru's separation from Shekau in October 2011 and that Ansaru, as Droukdel had recommended, specifically targeted Christians and Westerners in Nigeria (al-Andalus, April 2017).

Droukdel's Response to Abu Zeid on Boko Haram

When Droukdel finally responded to Abu Zeid in September 2009, he approved all of Boko Haram's requests, indicating he was giving his full backing to AQIM's support of the Nigerian militant group. Also notable was Droukdel's advice that Abu Zeid should convey to Boko Haram that Muslims civilians should be spared and that Christian proselytizers, Westerners, and the Nigerian government be targeted with "special operations." Droukdel further promised media support to Boko Haram ([al-Andalus](#), April 2017).

This would explain why Abubakar Shekau's October 2010 Eid el-Fitr written statement was released not by Boko Haram, but by AQIM's al-Andalus media agency. AQIM released an April 2010 video showing clips from al-Jazeera documenting the killings of Boko Haram members in July 2009 ([al-Andalus](#), October 2, 2010; [al-Andalus](#), April 12, 2010). Finally, Droukdel also encouraged Sahel-based AQIM commanders to manage the relationship with Boko Haram, indicating that they were closer to the Nigerian group than Droukdel himself and could better "supervise" Boko Haram's training ([al-Andalus](#), April 2017).

Droukdel approved al-Andalus' efforts in publicizing Boko Haram and Shekau, at least until the latter fell out with AQIM, and he issued the statement honoring Yusuf's martyrdom. Droukdel also issued another February 2010 statement through al-Andalus condemning the "genocide" in Nigeria and promising arms, training and fighters to "defend" Nigerian Muslims from "Christian minority aggression" ([al-Andalus](#), February 2, 2010).

Furthermore, in July 2010, Droukdel instructed Abu Zeid to provide 200,000 euros to Boko Haram, which was funneled into Nigeria by Khalid al-Barnawi ([al-Andalus](#), April 2017). Thus, by mid-2010 Droukdel had offered the full array of AQIM support to Boko Haram in terms of training, finances, weapons, and media, and he concluded by delegating the AQIM-Boko Haram relationship to his Sahel-based commanders.

AQIM and Boko Haram after Droukdel's Departure

The history of AQIM and Boko Haram after Droukdel's departure from management of the relationship is fairly well-known. By 2012, AQIM approved Ansaru's formation, and although sporadic communications with Shekau persisted, Boko Haram never returned to AQIM's fold (see [TM](#), January 10, 2013). Rather, Boko Haram eventually became interested in Islamic State and by 2015 Shekau had pledged his loyalty to Abubakar al-Baghdadi.

Droukdel's intervention in Nigeria, however, was also not an aberration. He became involved in advising AQIM-allied Malian jihadists when they occupied territory in 2012. However, they did not listen to Droukdel's advice about gradually implementing sharia on a religiously inexperienced population and instead imposed severe sharia punishments that alienated local civilians ([Associated Press](#), April 2012). Moreover, eventually some of those Sahelian jihadists formed Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS), which, like Boko Haram's successor, Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP), became opposed to AQIM.

In this regard, one can view Droukdel's record as AQIM leader as unsuccessful. Although jihadist projects burgeoned in Nigeria and the Sahel during his leadership of AQIM, only a fairly minimal al-Qaeda presence exists in Nigeria today through Ansaru, and an active presence of al-Qaeda in the Sahel. However, the latter competes with Islamic State-loyal forces. Meanwhile, the jihad in Algeria continues to wane, with AQIM and Islamic State fighters each carrying out only a handful of attacks in the country each year.

On the other end, many of Droukdel's struggles were beyond his capacity. He was not a leader like Abu Zeid or Belmokhtar who knew the terrain and societies of the Sahel and Nigeria. Moreover, it was due to Droukdel's predecessors in the GSPC and the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) that Algerians began to sour on the idea of jihadist insurrection in Algeria. In addition, Droukdel was never intended to be the type of leader that also ventured onto the battlefield. Rather, his leadership was defined by providing guidance, issuing statements and maintaining loyalty to al-Qaeda. In this regard, he demonstrated a clear ideology, albeit with a decidedly Algerian orientation, and lived up to what al-Qaeda Central would have expected of him.

To Droukdel's credit, al-Qaeda's image never suffered under his watch. The group avoided the types of mass killings of Muslims that defined the GIA, Abubakar Shekau-led Boko Haram and Islamic State. Moreover, despite the upsurge in global jihadist support for Islamic State, AQIM never budged. Al-Qaeda, therefore, had a reliable partner in Droukdel. Similarly, Boko Haram and Malian jihadists would have found Droukdel reliable, especially given the support he

directed AQIM to provide to Boko Haram, despite some of them abandoning AQIM for Islamic State.

The biggest issue with Droukdel's leadership, in fact, was that his subordinates often had their own interests and competing objectives and simply did not follow Droukdel's guidance. Droukdel, for his part, also had little means to compel their compliance. This points not so much to Droukdel's vulnerabilities, but rather to the challenges of jihadist group alliances, internal dynamics and organizational structure, especially when AQIM expanded into the new frontiers in the Sahel and Nigeria.

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