



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

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Notorious Islamic State Kidnapper Arrested in the Philippines—Idang Susukan

John Foulkes

On August 13, the Philippines National Police (PNP) arrested Anduljihad ‘Idang’ Susukan, a sub-commander of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) ([Rappler](#), August 13). Susukan was arrested in Davao City, on the island of Mindanao, in the home of Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) faction leader Nur Misuari. Misuari had facilitated the negotiations behind Susukan’s surrender after Malaysian media reported sightings of him walking freely in Davao City ([The Star](#), August 13; [CNN Philippines](#), August 13). A total of 34 arrest warrants existed against Susukan for kidnappings and killings in the southern Filipino islands and the east coast of the Malaysian province of Sabah. His history and career highlights the difficulty Southeast Asian governments face in combatting criminal and terrorism networks operating over maritime boundaries in this volatile part of the region.

Susukan is a sub-commander of the ASG faction led by Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan, who is also purportedly the acting emir of Islamic State in East Asia (ISEA) (see [MLM](#), August 6; [Manila Bulletin](#), August 13). Before his arrest, Susukan was based out of the Tilapao municipality in southern Jolo Island. [1] ASG factions are based around interlinked clans or families, and the Susukan clan is no exception. His family has been involved in the local insurgency for several decades. Idang Susukan’s brother, Mujib Susukan, was a key leader of ASG who was killed in a shootout with Filipino forces in May 2003. Another brother, Jaber Susukan, was killed by the AFP in June, 2017 ([Anadolu Agency](#), June 3, 2017).

Susukan has been active in kidnapping tourists and fishermen for ransom on the east coast of Sabah since 2013. During this time, he was connected to Malaysian insurgents Zulkifli Abdihur and Amin Baco ([Manila Bulletin](#), August 13). On April 2, 2014, he was involved in the kidnapping of a Chinese and Filipino national from a resort in Seporna, Sabah. A Chinese and a Malaysian national were kidnapped from a fish farm in Kunak, Sabah on May 6, 2014, and June 16, 2014, respectively, by

Susukan and his followers. Susukan was also connected to the kidnapping of Malaysian tourist Bernard Then on May 14, 2015. Then was beheaded on November 15, 2015 ([Inquirer.net](#), August 13).

In February 2019, Susukan was involved in a significant clash between soldiers from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and ASG. Sawadjaan reportedly was present in leading his forces in the fight (see [MLM](#), August 6). Reportedly, over 100 ASG insurgents engaged in the intense firefight with the Fifth Scout Ranger Battalion in Patikul, Sulu province ([CNN Philippines](#), February 3, 2019). Although it was first reported that Susukan had been killed in this encounter, it later emerged that he had survived, but lost his left arm in the fight ([Daily Express](#), February 10, 2019).

Reportedly, as a consequence of this serious injury, Susukan surrendered to Nur Misuari and his faction of the MNLF on Jolo Island in April 2020 ([Rappler](#), August 13). Though Misuari is an MNLF leader who has been fighting for Mindanao independence since the 1970s and currently has a warrant out for his arrest, he has recently been engaging in peace negotiations with the Filipino government. Misuari led MNLF forces in a siege of Zamboanga City in 2013, in an attempt to seize the city from the Filipino government. Susukan reportedly took part in this operation ([Philippines Star](#), August 14). Misuari has since worked with Filipino President Robert Duterte to facilitate the surrender of ISEA and ASG terrorists in an attempt to redeem his reputation with Manila ([CNN Philippines](#), August 13; [Straits Times](#), August 15). Susukan stayed with Misuari in Jolo Island until early August, when the two reportedly travelled to Davao City to have Susukan fitted for a prosthetic arm. At this time, and following the publication of his presence in the city, Susukan surrendered to the police ([The Star](#), August 13).

AFP and PNP officials said in the days following Susukan's arrest that they would be vigilant for potential reprisal attacks. Such an attack appeared to have taken place when twin bombings hit the city of Jolo on August 24, killing 14 and injuring 75 ([Rappler](#), August 24). ISEA claimed responsibility for the attack in the days following the bombings ([Inquirer.net](#), August 26). Some analysts linked the attack to Susukan's arrest, though the AFP has not definitively labelled the attack as being directly connected ([GMA News](#), August 25; [The Star](#), August 25). Local officials have alleged that a female suicide bomber involved in the attack had links to Mundi Sawadjaan, who is the nephew of the ISEA emir and a sub-leader of the group with experience in bombmaking. The Sawadjaan faction's responsibility for the attack would lend some credence to the reprisal theory.

Susukan's militant career relied on the ease of movement and lack of oversight that exists in the maritime territories of the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas. Most of the kidnappings led by Susukan took place in Sabah province and involved the kidnapping of Malaysians or foreign national tourists, who would be spirited away over these seas to Sulu province, from where the ASG militants would demand ransom. The kidnapping operations involved networks of informants and spotters located in Sabah, and the money earned from ransom would go to purchase needed weapons and support ASG clan and patronage networks.

Kidnappings for ransom declined in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas in 2017, with no kidnappings taking place between March 2017-September 2018. Several factors were responsible for this drop-off. These include: some factions receiving direct funding from Islamic State and no longer requiring resources provided by kidnapping; the killing of ASG leaders and the deaths of numerous militants in the Battle of Marawi; and

greater maritime and intelligence cooperation between the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, as demonstrated by the joint Trilateral Maritime Patrol program ([Straits Times](#), June 20, 2017; [Inquirer.net](#), October 25, 2017). [2]

The increase in kidnappings, crime, and violence in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas since 2018 is likely the result of new leaders taking the place of those killed as well as a greater need for funding from local militant networks. The trilateral efforts between the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia can partially claim credit for the temporary decrease in cross-border crimes, but their military response does nothing to change the kidnapping industry that is deeply rooted in Sulu province's clan and political dynamics. It is quite likely that had Susukan not lost his arm and surrendered, he would have continued to kidnapfishermen and tourists from the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas. His arrest is a temporary setback for ASG that in the short-term will upend their kidnapping for ransom operations. The greater threat of instability in the region, however, will continue unless regional countries continue to increase their intelligence sharing and military cooperation and the Philippines improves its governance of both the Sulu province and the wider Muslim-majority provinces in its south, and provide economic alternatives to militant activity.

John Foulkes is the Editor of Militant Leadership Monitor.

Notes

[1] *Protecting the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas from Abu Sayyaf Attacks* (p. 3, Rep. No. 53). (2019). Jakarta, Indonesia: [Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict](#).

[2] Ibid.

Shaykh Hassan Hussein Adam: al-Shabaab's Ideologue Shaping the Insurgent Response to COVID-19

Sunugta West

Shaykh Hassan Hussein Adam is an ideological and spiritual leader of al-Shabaab who has done the most to shape how the Somalia-based militant group has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. His opinion on the virus is the latest missive from the 41-year-old cleric whose past pronouncements have held sway over the al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa.

For years, fighters within al-Shabaab have considered Adam their non-official *mufti*, an Islamic jurist qualified to issue a nonbinding opinion (*fatwa*) on a point of Islamic law (*Sharia*). The fighters and supporters have also treated his opinion as compulsory and binding ([Intelligence Briefs](#), March 23, 2015).

According to news reports, the charismatic ideologue rose to fame in 2008, a period when al-Shabaab is believed to have first started making inroads into Kenya. Around that same time, young and more militant Islamic preachers replaced the moderate ones, especially in mosques in Eastleigh, a neighborhood in Nairobi nicknamed 'Little Mogadishu' due to its large concentration of ethnic Somalis.

Adam is considered sharp, articulate, and a hardline cleric who knows his mission. From Eastleigh, he has issued decrees on a range of issues, including al-Shabaab's leadership style. He has also delivered lectures, writings, and sermons justifying al-Shabaab's war against the Somali government ([Africanargument](#), September 25, 2013).

In 2013, the late Shaykh Ahmed Abdi Godane, who was then the emir of al-Shabaab, engaged in a purge of al-Shabaab leaders who were considered dissidents. Among those killed were American jihadist Omar Hammami and Godane's mentor and friend, Ibrahim al-Afghani. A prominent al-Shabaab leader and founder, Shaykh Hassan Dahir Awey, narrowly escaped death and sought refuge on the government side. Taking action, Godane is said to have followed Adam's *fatwas* ([Wardheer News](#), April 2, 2014).

Adam has issued *fatwas* against the Federal Government of Somalia, thus giving Somali Islamists reasons to target the government and its allies. According to analysts, the *fatwas* have prevented meaningful dialogue between al-Shabaab and the government. His pronouncements have been widely distributed in pro-al-Shabaab channels ([Intelligence Briefs](#), March 23, 2015).

In the last few years, Adam appeared to tone down his rhetoric, but his comments this year in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic have brought attention back to the cleric. In mid-March, the cleric questioned the logic of complying with the Kenyan government's COVID-19 social distancing measures, which required all places of worship to shut down. He questioned why imams were rushing to close mosques. According to Adam, the Kenyan government should have equipped the mosques and other places of worship with special equipment to detect the virus or its symptoms before ordering the shutdown of mosques.

Like the rest of his earlier pronouncements, this opinion was widely cheered in Somalia and shared on various al-Shabaab-friendly media outlets. It also fed into the dis-information, propaganda, and conspiracy theories the group spread about the virus. Messages from al-

Shabaab leadership told supporters that the virus was Allah's punishment of non-believers for their evil deeds against Muslims and jihadists ([Nation](#), July 25).

Adam was born in Garissa in northern Kenya in 1979. His parents are believed to be Somali migrants who moved from Ethiopia's Ogaden region and settled in Kenya's northeastern region. He is Darood, a sub-clan of the Ogaden clan.

He uses several aliases, including Hassan Mahad Omar, Asan Mahad Cumar, Hassan Hussien Aden, Xassaan Xuseen Adan, and Abu Salaam. Initially, Adam served as one of al-Shabaab's leaders and imam of Masjid Ul-Ahmar, one of the mosques affiliated with al-Shabaab. He was also allegedly recruiting for al-Shabaab. At the time, the al-Hidaya, Beit ul Mal Madrassa and Abubakar as Saddique mosques were also affiliated with the militant group.

Reports indicate he studied at a university in Saudi Arabia, where he came into contact with takfiri ideology—the theological declaration that a Muslim has become an apostate or a person is an infidel. Based on his age, it can be deduced that he attended the university in the 1990s, though the exact time of his studies is unknown. While at university, he embraced Salafism. Since then, the cleric has been the chief proponent of Salafist-jihadism in Kenya, Djibouti and Somalia.

In September 2019, the U.S. placed sanctions on Adam, describing him as a threat to the country's security ([The Sun Weekly](#), September, 2019). The United Nations was the first to sanction Adam, subjecting him to a travel ban, assets freeze, and targeted arms embargo in 2011 ([United Nations](#), July 29, 2011). The U.N. Security Council accused the cleric of being a threat to peace, security, and stability of Somalia. He allegedly provided material support to al-

Shabaab and facilitated youth recruitment for the group ([Wardeernews](#), April 2, 2014).

In 2015, the cleric pledged his allegiance to Islamic State (IS) and its then-leader, the late Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. He also asked al-Shabaab to recognize IS as a legitimate jihadist organization and forge an alliance with it. He wanted al-Shabaab to accept the IS leader in Somalia, Shaykh Abdulqadir Mumin.

Two years earlier, in 2012, his activities enraged Somali Muslim leaders who congregated in Nairobi and issued a *fatwa* against the cleric. They had characterized his actions and teachings as un-Islamic, while urging all Muslims to boycott and ignore his seminars, lectures and books.

In 2014, Kenyan security agencies raided Adam's home in Nairobi and arrested the cleric together with his wife. He was set free after a few days in custody. From Nairobi, Adam still continues his activities, which are closely followed by al-Shabaab and its supporters.

Sunguta West is an independent journalist based in Nairobi.

Islamic State Obituary Profiles the Life of Slain Maldivian Jihadist Ahmad Nishwan

Animesh Roul

In early May 2020, the pro-Islamic State (IS) media center Haqqu released a documentary on the life of the slain Maldivian jihadist Ahmad Nishwan. The biographical sketch on Nishwan, which is approximately 33-minutes-long, comes amid IS' increased outreach efforts to Maldivians. Islamic State is using its dedicated Divehi-language media group, Haqqu (meaning "truth"), and other pro-IS platforms, such as the al-Qitaal media center, to urge Maldivians to join the militant group, stage attacks in the country, and campaign for the release of Maldivian war widows and children from refugee camps controlled by the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in al-Hol, Syria.

The Divehi-language biographical account, titled "True in their words and action," was peppered with Arabic chants and narration for greater impact within the targeted country and the wider Arabic-influenced regions of South Asia. [1] The eulogy depicted the honorific *Ustaz* (teacher), underscoring Nishwan's expertise in Islamic theology and his position among Islamic State's Maldivian fighter contingents in the Syrian war theater. Though local media and government officials have remained silent on Nishwan thus far, the biographical information shared through this documentary sheds light on his transformation from an Islamic teacher into a hardcore jihadist.

Born and brought up on Maradhoo island, located in the Addu Atoll, Nishwan completed his Islamic schooling in Addu city. In 2005, at the age of 20, he traveled to Yemen to undertake higher education in Islamic Law and

jurisprudence. According to the documentary, he was primarily influenced by the teachings of al-Qaeda ideologue and influential jihadist Anwar al-Awlaki. During his stay in Yemen, Nishwan even met him. Also, though the documentary was silent on when and how he met Awlaki, it is possible that he encountered the al-Qaeda cleric at al-Iman University, Sanna, before August 2006, when the Yemeni authorities detained al-Awlaki for a couple of years. Similar to Awlaki's career, Nishwan returned to the Maldives and engaged in further Islamic study, becoming a religious teacher in Addu city. Similarly, Awlaki returned to Shabwa in southern Yemen, sacrificing his promising career in the United States and United Kingdom in 2004 for Islamist activities.

Upon returning to the Maldives from Yemen, Nishwan's Islamic activism increased substantially, fueled by social media and publishing tools like Facebook and WordPress. He engaged in virtual discourses on Islamic doctrines, speaking out against the government's anti-Islam policies, and was also active in spreading news of ongoing jihadist developments. Traces of his Salafi-jihadist messaging on his now-defunct Facebook pages can still be found on the internet. This is one example of Nishwan's inclination towards the ideals of Islamic State before he joined the transnational jihadist group in Syria in July 2015. It underscored how Nishwan, already a "hajurite haddadi" extremist, turned into a hardcore "takfiri Kharijite" ([Al Hajuri](#), December 06 2014).

The Haqqu video also highlighted his Divehi-English language WordPress blog, Salafi Media MV, which mostly contains theological literature dated before October 2015. Nishwan was subsequently killed in Ramadi, Iraq, in a U.S. airstrike. The documentary noted how his wife and two daughters also died in March 2019 in Baghuz during a coalition airstrike. The other

two surviving daughters are presently in al-Hol refugee camp, along with thousands of (IS-linked) war widows and their family. This information corresponds with ground reports from al-Hol, where Maldivian authorities learned that over 30 Maldivians were living in dire conditions in refugee camps and detention facilities in Syria and have requested repatriation ([Sun](#), April 27).

Nishwan was one of the first Maldivians to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the late leader of the IS caliphate in Syria and Iraq that emerged in 2014. Though the documentary noted that Nishwan initially plotted lone-wolf strikes in the Maldives targeting American tourists or officials visiting the island nation, he failed in his attempts. Later in July 2015, he traveled to IS-held territories in Iraq and Syria with his pregnant wife and three young daughters. The documentary also claimed that, despite his ideological and military training under the IS field command, due to poor health he was engaged only in propaganda activities and became part of the Haqqu media center. His knowledge of Islam and jihad, with expertise in the Divehi and Arabic languages, made him an asset to the IS propaganda arm.

The local Divehi language unit emerged back in 2014 as a publishing platform for pro-IS materials and translations. It released jihadist literature and songs (*naseeds*) primarily to attract Maldivian youth by romanticizing jihad and martyrdom. Like Nishwan's biography, Haqqu published similar sketches glorifying Maldivian jihadists and their life stories to serve as a motivation for jihad for the cause of the caliphate. It released a similar video featuring a slain Maldivian jihadist with the *nom de guerre* Abu Ikrimah in early February 2016 ([Haqqu Media/Archive](#), February 2, 2016). Again, in late July 2017, it released a detailed anti-Maldives video titled "Glad Tidings to the Strangers," promoting Maldivian fighters who died fighting

alongside Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. It also featured Maldivian jihadists who had earlier been members of al-Qaeda in Waziristan, Pakistan, and later joined the caliphate. This video featured Nishwan briefly alongside at least four Maldivians who died in Syria ([Haqqu Media Centre, Archive](#), August 1, 2017).

Since its inception, the Haqqu media center has played a vital role in radicalizing Maldivians, and it is still luring them towards the cause of the crumbled IS caliphate.

The transnational jihadist group established its foothold in the scenic Maldives for the first time in July 2014. Early ideological efforts were manifested through randomly raised IS flags or insignia in protest rallies or in city squares. Since mid-2019, an increase in IS activities emerged in the Maldives. In October 2019, police arrested a U.S. sanctioned terrorist, Mohamad Ameen, who was recruiting fighters for IS ([Edition](#), October 24; [US Treasury \(OFAC\)](#) September 10, 2019). A month after, in November, several Maldivians fighting alongside Islamic State-Khurasan province, the group's branch in Afghanistan, were taken into custody by Afghan forces.

This past April 15, almost six years into its shadowy presence in the Maldives, IS claimed its first attack. Unidentified local affiliates used incendiary weapons to set five government-owned boats on fire, including a sea ambulance and police patrolling vessel in Mahibadhoo harbor in Alifu Dhaalu Atoll ([One Online](#), April 15). IS said in a statement that the boats belonged to the "Apostate Government of the Maldives and its loyalists." Before this arson attack, in early February 2020, an IS-inspired stabbing spree injured three foreign nationals. Though the group did not claim the knife attacks initially, it praised the incident via a publication called Sawt al-Hind (Voice of Hind), published by the Indian branch of IS. It extolled the "Lions of Khilafah" in the Maldives and urged Muslims of neighboring countries to follow their example. The al-Qitaal media center publishes the Voice

of Hind magazine, an official outlet of the pro-IS jihadist group Ansar ul Khilafah in Hind.

The video messages chronicling the life and journey of Maldivians certainly sheds light on how they have sacrificed material possessions for the cause of the caliphate and traveled to Iraq and Syria during the heights of the conflicts there in 2014-2016. Ironically, the steady stream of foreign fighters to the caliphate was ignored by the Maldives' national government as well as its mainstream media. Initially, media coverage of Maldivians joining the transnational jihadist groups took place, especially by now-defunct independent news portals such as Minivan news and Maldives Independent, but the issue has often been swept under the rug and never received any serious attention until now. It should be noted that IS rival al-Qaeda also attracted Maldivians into its fold, several of whom have died in Syria and Iraq.

IS' aggressive Maldives-centric campaign through media units like Haqqu has certainly exacerbated the extremist trend in the Maldives, and biographical documentaries like Nishwan's will continue to play a substantial role in fueling local jihadist sentiments long after his death.

Animesh Roul is the executive director of the New Delhi-based policy research group Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict. He specializes in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing, and armed conflict and violence in South Asia. Mr. Roul has written extensively on these subject areas, being published in edited books, journals, and policy magazines. He co-authored a book on India's indigenous terror group Indian Mujahideen (Springer, 2013).

Notes

[1] "True in their words and action - al-Ustaz Abu 'Ubaidah Ahmad Nishwan" May 02, 2020, <https://archive.org/details/abu-ubaidah-1080p> (Accessed on August 16, 2020).

Ibrahim Sadr: The Hardline Former Military Chief Maintaining Influence Over the Taliban

Sudha Ramachandran

In early May, the Taliban announced the appointment of Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, son of its founder-leader Mullah Mohammed Omar and deputy to its current amir (leader) Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, as chief of its military commission. Ibrahim Sadr, who Yaqoob replaced, and Abdul Qayyum Zakir would work as the new military chief's deputies and also lead the military commission in the southwestern zone and eastern zone respectively, the Taliban said ([Arab News](#), May 10). The changes are significant, as they come just months after the Taliban and the United States signed a peace deal under which the U.S. would withdraw its troops from Afghanistan while the militant group engaged in talks with the Afghan government to settle the decades-old conflict in the country.

Sadr has been part of the Taliban military for over two decades and has functioned as its chief of military commission since 2014. He is also among the “most influential members” of the *Rahbari Shura* (leadership council) ([Afghanistan Analysts Network](#), June 22, 2016). He is credited with “transforming the Taliban from a humiliated pariah government to one of the world’s most effective guerrilla armies” ([Asia Times](#), July 16). According to terrorism analyst Abdul Basit, Sadr is “the architect of the Taliban’s recent battlefield victories and territorial gains.” [1] Why has a leader who has contributed significantly to the Taliban’s military resurgence been replaced, even demoted, in the recent leadership reshuffle?

Early Years

Born in the late 1960s in Jogharan village in Helmand province, Sadr is of Pashtun origin and belongs to the Alakozai tribe. His family participated in the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s; he and his father joined the Jamiat-e Islami, one of the largest mujahideen groups. However, Sadr distanced himself from the fighting when inter-mujahideen violence broke out after the fall of the Communist government in 1992, leaving the country for Peshawar in Pakistan for religious studies. He was among the first batch of recruits to heed the Taliban’s calls to join the jihad to set up an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. Although he was close to Taliban leaders, he seems to have maintained a low profile during this period and it was only after the Taliban took power that he began to rise in its hierarchy. During Taliban rule, Sadr was in charge of Kabul airport and was a commander of the Air Force for Kabul. He is said to have “played a small but important role” in fighting the Northern Alliance. Pilots under his command carried out aerial bombing of Northern Alliance targets during this period ([Asia Times](#), July 16).

In November 2001, Sadr, like other Taliban commanders, retreated in the face of the advancing fighters of the Northern Alliance and the U.S.-led coalition forces. Little is known about his activities during this period but he is believed to have played a key role in strategizing the Taliban’s anti-U.S. insurgency.

Proximity to Mansour

In 2014, Sadr replaced Zakir as military commission chief. Differences between Zakir and Mullah Mohammad Mansour, then Omar’s deputy, over the question of negotiations with the Afghan government were reportedly behind the decision to replace Zakir ([Militant Leadership Monitor](#), July 2). Besides his military skills, Sadr’s proximity to Mansour is said to have played an important role in his appointment as

military chief. Their relationship went back to the late 1990s, when Mansour was Minister of Civil Aviation and Transportation in the Taliban regime and Sadr was part of the same ministry ([Asia Times](#), July 16). Over the years, Sadr emerged as a close associate of Mansour and this likely weighed in his favor, especially in the 2013-16 period, when Mansour was trying to consolidate control over the Taliban. Unknown to the outside world at that time, even to many Taliban leaders and rank-and-file members, Omar had died in 2013, a fact that Mansour kept secret until 2015. Having old confidantes in key positions would have been imperative to Mansour during this period, hence the appointment of a reliable person like Sadr as military chief.

Sadr's Achievements

Following Mansour's death in a drone attack in Pakistan in 2016, Sadr pledged loyalty to the new leader, Akhundzada, who retained him as military chief. In the years since, the Taliban has done well on the battlefield. Not only has it wrested control over vast swathes of Afghan territory from the government—it controls more territory today than at any time since its ouster from power in 2001—but it has also been able to contain the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) to a few districts in Nangarhar province (see [MLM](#), December 10, 2018). The Taliban's territorial gains under Akhundzada's leadership can be attributed to Sadr and, importantly, the military commission under him has forced the U.S. out of Afghanistan, says Basit. [2]

Besides being in charge of the insurgency nationwide, Sadr controls the Taliban's resources, including the money raised from the drug trade and the marble business, says Afghan journalist Sami Yousafzai. [3] Sadr keeps track of all infrastructure development projects in the country and is paid a percentage of the project funds by both government and private entities, an Afghan government official said. [4]

Sadr appears also to have played an important role in the Taliban's outreach to Iran. According to Yousafzai, Sadr has "very warm relations with Iran" and, along with other Taliban leaders, has been visiting the country "frequently." The Taliban has an office in Iran and injured fighters are treated there. [5] Indeed, Iran's provision of financial support and tactical and combat training to the Taliban prompted the U.S. Treasury Department to designate Sadr and eight other Taliban leaders as global terrorists in October 2018 ([U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), October 23, 2018).

Divisive Figure

Did Sadr's close relationship with Iran rile the Pakistan-friendly Taliban leadership, culminating in his replacement by Yaqoob? The Taliban would have been under pressure from the United States and Pakistan to cut ties with Iran. It is unlikely, however, to have been the main factor behind the decision, says Yousafzai. [6] After all, relations between the Taliban and Iran are neither new nor have been cultivated by Sadr alone. Indeed, the Taliban formalized its relations with Iran by appointing "envoys" to the country ([Tolo News](#), November 16, 2016).

It is more likely that Sadr's replacement has to do with his views on the peace agreement. He is said to be strongly opposed to the deal. According to Basit, the Taliban has realized that "military operations can get them territory but not power in Afghanistan" and do not want Sadr, who is a "military hardliner and strongly opposed to talks, power sharing and compromise, to express his reservations in public" and thus derail the talks. Akhundzada wants to unify the Taliban movement and ensure that the rank-and-file stands by decisions the leadership takes in the coming months. Sadr is a divisive figure. In contrast, Yaqoob, given "his lineage and bloodline, commands enormous respect among the rank-and-file" and will be

able to rally them around the leadership's decisions. [7]

Still Influential

Sadr, Zakir, and other Taliban leaders who are close to Iran and opposed to reconciliation efforts are said to have split from the Taliban to form a group, the Hezb-e Walayat-e Islami, which is based in Iran and is in its nascent stages ([Gandhara](#), June 9). However, according to Yousafzai, Sadr is still a part of the Taliban movement and the Taliban remains “a united force.” Importantly, while Sadr may have been stripped of his title of chief of military commission, little much else seems to have changed with regard to his influence in the Taliban. His area of operational command has not reduced. Besides, unlike Yaqoob, who is based in Pakistan, Sadr is active inside Afghanistan. [8] Therefore, it is Sadr who is calling the shots on the ground in Afghanistan.

Reports of Sadr splitting from the Taliban may not be fully accurate. However, as a military man opposed to reconciliation with the Afghan government, he could rebel should the Taliban leadership and the political wing accept terms that are not in sync with his more hardline views. Sadr does, therefore, pose a threat to a negotiated settlement of the Afghan conflict.

Dr. Sudha Ramachandran is an independent researcher and journalist based in Bangalore, India. She has written extensively on South Asian peace and conflict, political and security issues for The Diplomat, Asia Times and Geopolitics.

Notes

[1] Author's Interview, Abdul Basit, associate research fellow at the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, August 12.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Author's Interview, Kabul-based Afghan journalist, Sami Yousafzai, August 15.

[4] Author's Interview, Afghan government official, August 19.

[5] Yousafzai, n. 3.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Basit, n.1.

[8] Yousafzai, n.3.

The Shadowy Leader of the PMU Confronting the U.S. in Iraq—Abdul-Aziz al-Muhammadawi

Rami Jameel

On February 21, leaders of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU)—the official umbrella group of Iraq’s Shia-dominated militias—announced that they had agreed to appoint Abdul Aziz al-Muhammadawi as the chief of staff of their organization ([al-Mayadeen](#), February 20).

Al-Muhammadawi (a.k.a. Abu Fadak) has been a shadowy figure despite his senior position within the PMU. Until his appointment to succeed Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, almost no one outside the militia movement knew who he was or what he looked like. Al-Muhandis (a.k.a. Jamal Jaafar al-Ibrahim) the previous deputy chairman of the PMU, was killed seven weeks earlier alongside Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), in a U.S. airstrike outside the Baghdad International airport. Al-Muhandis had been the founding father of the Iranian-backed militia Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH) and al-Muhammadawi was one of the group’s most prominent leaders ([Sky News Arabia](#), January 3).

The killing of Soleimani and al-Muhandis was a blow to Iran and the Iraqi Shia militias. Both men had actively led operations across the Middle East since the early 1980s, and were close with al-Muhammadawi. His appointment came at a critical time for the Shia militias as they faced two major challenges. The first challenge was the confrontation with the United States, which overlapped with the wider U.S.-Iran conflict. And the second challenge came from the protest movement that grew around Baghdad

and the predominantly Shia region of southern Iraq. Protestors have called for better services and meaningful anti-corruption measures as part of a desire for genuine reform in the government. The PMU has viewed the protests with great suspicion and labeled them as part of an American and Western conspiracy. In turn, the protesters have accused the militias, and especially al-Muhammadawi’s KH, of spearheading the crackdowns that led to the deaths of hundreds ([al-Arabiya](#), May 24).

Stalled Restructuring

The killing of al-Muhandis has exposed the problems associated with the restructuring process, ordered by the Iraqi prime minister, which is taking place within the PMU. The post of deputy chairman was supposed to be removed and replaced by the position of chief of staff. This role was intended to be occupied by a career military officer, not a militia commander ([Ikh News](#), September 21).

The restructuring was part of a decree issued by then-Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi aimed at reforming the PMU and imposing greater governmental control of its activities and command. Abdul-Mahdi issued the decree under pressure from Washington to rein in the Iranian-backed Shia militias. Two major problems challenged Abdul-Mahdi’s reforms. First, the militias were not going to surrender to any move that would have curtailed their power and influence. With the strategic backing of Iran, the militias have their own political factions that dominate the Iraqi government and parliament. The second issue was that Abdul-Mahdi himself seemed unwilling to undertake the serious endeavor of pursuing a genuine anti-militia policy. His own appointment came after an agreement between the two most powerful factions in the Shia militias movement: the anti-U.S. Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr’s supporters

and the al-Fatah party, which is a coalition of all the other Iranian-backed Shia militias.

The way al-Muhammadawi was selected proved that the PMU is more a union of Shia militias than an official branch of the Iraqi armed forces, as claimed by successive governments in Baghdad and as stated in the 2016 legislation that legalized the organization ([Al Jazeera](#), November 27, 2016).

Six of the main influential militia leaders held a meeting and decided to select al-Muhammadawi to succeed al-Muhandis. The leaders promised that the prime minister, in his capacity as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, would endorse the decision by issuing an official decree to confirm al-Muhammadawi in his new position ([Aawsat](#), February 22).

Such a decree was not issued by Abdul-Mahdi or by his successor Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who has been more willing to check the power of the militias. Nevertheless, al-Muhammadawi remains in his position, albeit as acting chief of staff. Vetoing the decision of the Iranian-backed militias was, clearly, never a possibility for the prime minister's office. In Iraq, it has always been the case that the identity and influence of the figures who fill the important positions are more significant than the titles or requirements of those positions.

The PMU Split

The PMU has always been dominated by Iranian-backed militias, but the organization also includes certain groups directly linked to Iraq's most senior Shia cleric, Ali al-Sistani. Several reports have emerged highlighting the growing friction between these two factions, but they never clashed publicly until the appointment of al-Muhammadawi. The Sistani-linked faction apparently expected to have one of its own chosen as the new operational commander and

successor to al-Muhandis. When that did not happen, it declared that it would no longer be part of the PMU, and that its forces would be placed directly under the command of the ministry of defense as semi-regular army units ([Gilgamesh Press](#), February 22).

The split within the PMU showed how powerful the Iranian-backed groups have become. Although the *fatwa* that Sistani issued in June 2014 has always been the main source of the PMU's legitimacy, Iraqi militias were always seen to have a strong alliance with Iran and its IRGC-QF. Their religious and political allegiance seemed to be more aligned with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The appointment of al-Muhammadawi brought the growing differences between the two factions to a head, and resulted in the Sistani-linked faction leaving while the Iranian-linked faction remained as the backbone of the PMU ([Nas News](#), April 25).

Criteria for Selection

Many analysts thought that al-Muhandis would be replaced by Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of the al-Fatah coalition and commander of the largest Shia militia, Badr ([al-Alamty](#), January 3). However, the fact that al-Muhammadawi was chosen shows the importance of specific considerations. Al-Amiri is a well-known politician who has occupied several positions in parliament and government since 2003. The commanders of the PMU and their backers preferred someone who is less known to the world, who would make a harder target for the United States and any other perceived enemy. The selection also shows the powerful status of the KH militia within the PMU. KH was founded by al-Muhandis, and unlike Badr, chose to pursue the path of insurgency against U.S.-led forces after 2003. Al-Muhammadawi was an active supporter of that decision. After his selection, reports surfaced suggesting that there

was close coordination between him and his then-leader al-Amiri during the early years of the Iraq war when al-Muhammadawi was fighting U.S. forces and al-Amiri participated in the U.S.-sponsored political process. Badr has never admitted to taking part in the insurgency and many of its members had actually joined the security forces after 2003 ([al-Qabas](#), February 21).

Al-Muhammadawi was also a stronger candidate than Abu Ali al-Basri, another prominent PMU figure, and other, younger PMU commanders. Al-Muhammadawi has a long history with the Iranian-sponsored Shia jihadist movement. He fled Iraq to Iran in the early 1980s, and was a founding member of Badr in 1983. Alongside al-Amiri, al-Muhandis, and several other Shia militia leaders, he fought on the Iranian side during the Iran-Iraq war between 1980-1988.

On top of al-Muhammadawi's many credentials, his candidacy was supported by Iran and its trusted allies in the Middle East. Reports indicate that the Secretary General of Lebanese Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah—who has significant influence within the Iraqi militias—directly interfered to confirm his selection ([Sky News Arabia](#), February 21).

The Campaign Against Islamic State

When the Sunni extremist group Islamic State (IS) made its major advances in Iraq in the summer of 2014, Shia militias swiftly deployed on numerous fronts. As Baghdad itself came under the threat of falling to IS, the militias organized defensive lines around the Iraqi capital. Al-Muhammadawi was a field commander during that crisis. The PMU was formed soon after based on the call-to-arms *fatwa* issued by al-Sistani. Although the *fatwa* had called for all Iraqis to take arms and fight IS by joining the security forces, it was the more organized Iranian-backed militias that gained

the most recruits. With IS stopping short of launching a massive attack on Baghdad, the PMU's strategy became more offensive. It began a clearing campaign in Sunni-majority areas around Baghdad in order to deny IS any potential strongholds or launching pads. Al-Muhammadawi played a key role in the most important battle in that campaign—the offensive on Jurf al-Sakhara. A Sunni-populated area southwest of Baghdad, Jurf al-Sakhara held special strategic importance as it was located between Baghdad and the Sunni cities of Fallujah and Ramadi, which were under IS control, on one side and the holy Shia cities of Karbala and Najaf on the other ([Al Jazeera](#), February 23).

Al-Muhammadawi led the PMU, and in particular KH, to completely capture the area around Jurf al-Sakhara. Almost the entire local population was displaced. Although the operation was a strategic success for the PMU, several Sunnis criticized its perceived human rights abuses against civilians. Reports emerged of mass arrests, and at the time of writing there is no sign of the displaced Sunni population of the area returning home ([Niqash](#), August 30, 2017).

The campaign of Jurf al-Sakhar boosted the status of al-Muhammadawi within the PMU. During that operation he was known among his men as Abu Hameed. As a sign of utmost respect, his commander al-Muhandis was known in PMU circles as al-Shayeb (which means “the old man,” or “the grey-haired man”). After the advances in Jurf al-Sakhar and other areas, al-Muhammadawi became known among KH men in particular as al-Khal (which means the maternal uncle in Arabic). It was a nickname that expressed both affection and respect ([al-Mayadeen](#), February 21).

On December 15, 2015, KH attacked and kidnapped a group of Qataris hunting in

southern Iraq. They were kept as hostages for the following 16 months. After a long saga, the Qataris were released after the Syrian-based Sunni jihadist group al-Nusra Front ended sieges on Shia majority towns in Syria and a ransom of \$1 billion dollar was paid to KH in Iraq. Iraq's then-Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said that his government had seized and confiscated the ransom money ([al-Quds](#), April 21, 2017). The Qatari hunters were released anyway. This incident may have angered al-Muhammadawi, who believed that his group gave too much to the Iraqi government and needlessly let the money go ([Arabi21](#), February 29).

October Uprising

The anti-government protest that struck Baghdad and the predominantly Shia region of southern Iraq was considered a serious threat to the power structure of the Shia-led political system. The PMU and KH in particular played a key role in cracking down on protesters in Baghdad and other cities ([al-Khaleej Online](#), October 26). At General Soleimani's personal request, al-Muhammadawi rejoined the militia to take part in counter-protest work ([al-Arabiya](#), February 22). The name al-Khal became notorious among protesters and was glamorized by militia members, who painted it on walls in areas where they clashed with demonstrators. The most prominent incident where al-Muhammadawi was accused of leading the charge on protesters was near al-Sinak bridge in central Baghdad ([Shafaq](#), December 17).

Conclusion

By appointing al-Muhammadawi as chief of staff, the PMU probably chose the most anti-American figure for the position. Al-Muhammadawi is a man who has dedicated his career to fighting against U.S. interests in the region. While most of his comrades have abandoned arms and joined the political process,

leaving the Shia insurgency to be dominated by followers of al-Sadr in the early years after the invasion, al-Muhammadawi was one of the few who did not. He was a founding member of Badr in Iran in the 1980s, and a founding member of KH in the post-2003 invasion Iraq ([Ultra Iraq](#), February 21).

KH eventually grew to be one of the main Shia insurgent groups operating in Iraq, and then became one of the most active groups making up the PMU umbrella. Under the apparent influence of men like al-Muhandis and al-Muhammadawi, KH did not field candidates for election, unlike most of the other militias. The group maintained its secretive structure and its identity as a resistance group, which has shunned any kind of contact with the U.S. that might have come from being an official part of the Iraqi government and parliament.

More recently, when the U.S. bombed KH bases in December 2019, the group mobilized thousands of its followers to attack the U.S. embassy in Baghdad on December 31. The siege of the embassy ended without any serious break-in, but the phrase, "The uncle was here," written on the wall of the embassy, indicated al-Muhammadawi's key role in the attack ([al-Araby](#), December 31). A few days later, both Soleimani and al-Muhandis were killed. A few weeks after that, al-Muhammadawi was chosen to succeed al-Muhandis.

Al-Muhammadawi seems to have survived early challenges to his leadership, although the split of the Sistani-linked faction from the PMU seems to have not significantly damaged the organization. He survived and emerged as more powerful after his group's recent showdown with Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi. When the prime minister ordered his forces to raid a KH warehouse that was a launching pad for attacks on U.S. targets, leading to the arrest of 14 KH members, al-Muhammadawi led a counter-

attack in central Baghdad. PMU militia members invaded the heavily fortified green zone and surrounded forces loyal to al-Kadhimi. The KH detainees were freed the following day and all of the militia commanders reportedly supported al-Muhammadawi's operation ([Arabi21](#), June 25).

The appointment of al-Muhammadawi has shown KH's powerful position within the PMU and demonstrated how the current phase of the conflict between the Shia militias and the United States is open for greater escalation. Al-Muhammadawi's secretive character is well suited to lead this new phase of operations against the U.S. and other coalition forces in Iraq. New groups have already emerged and begun to claim responsibility for attacks on U.S. and coalition bases. The disguised identities of the groups will be well managed by a shadowy figure who enjoys the immunity given by an official position.

Rami Jameel is a researcher specializes in militant groups in the Middle East and North Africa. He focuses on the political and military conflicts in the region and its impact on global security.

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