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Abdulkadir Commandos: Another al-Shabaab Commander Succumbs to Vigorous U.S. Air Campaign

John Foulkes

On September 8, U.S. Africa Command confirmed the death of Abdulkadir Osman Yarow, a.k.a. Abdulkadir Commandos, a notorious commander of the Somali-based al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab. Commandos was killed in an airstrike outside Saakow, in the Middle Juba region of southern Somalia, on August 25 ([Goobjoob News](#), September 9). Sources within the Somali and U.S. militaries reported that Commandos was the intended target of the strike soon after the operation took place, but AFRICOM did not officially confirm this until two weeks later ([Garowe Online](#), August 26; [AFRICOM](#), September 8).

Commandos had an extensive history operating within militant circles in Somalia, holding leadership positions within multiple extremist groups before joining al-Shabaab. He was allegedly a soldier in the Somali Armed Forces before the central government’s collapse in 1991.

He eventually became an active member of al-Ittihad al-Islamiya, an early al-Qaeda-linked extremist group that conducted terrorist attacks and actively fought against Ethiopia and the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia ([HACRS](#), August 28).

After al-Ittihad al-Islamiya disbanded in the early 2000s, Commandos became a leader of Jabhat Islamiya, which fought against Ethiopia and the TSG during the former country’s intervention in Somalia in 2006-2009. Jabhat Islamiya eventually merged with several other organizations to form Hizbul Islam in 2009, of which Commandos was a founding member. He was the head of training for Hizbul Islam ([Strategic Intelligence](#) [Nairobi], August 27). Hizbul Islam merged with al-Shabaab in 2010 ([Garowe Online](#), August 27). Commandos pushed for the merger, an action that he might have later come to regret. His close associates, Ibrahim Afghani and Moalim Burhan, were later killed by al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane in July 2013 in an attempt to consolidate his control of the group. Sheikh Hassan Dir Aweys, an extremist leader currently under house arrest in Mogadishu who Commandos was close to ideologically, was also forced to flee and

surrender to the Somali government during this time ([HACRS](#), August 28; [The Star](#), March 14, 2017).

Commandos' position within al-Shabaab was downgraded as a result of his close association with the losers of the power struggle against Godane in 2013. His movements were temporarily restricted until his allies within the group's military wing argued that his operational experience was needed by al-Shabaab ([HACRS](#), August 28).

Commandos was involved in the planning of military operations and was relied upon by al-Shabaab to negotiate with clan leaders. Commandos was a senior commander within al-Shabaab, coordinating the group's activities in the volatile region of Lower Shabelle in the country's south. In addition to planning attacks against Somali and international forces, he managed the collection of taxes from the local populace ([Strategic Intelligence](#) [Nairobi], August 27; [Garowe Online](#), September 10). Perhaps his role with the most long-term ramification for the region was as a military trainer. Commandos trained both regular fighters and members of the Jaysh al-Ayman, an elite unit al-Shabaab created to carry out attacks inside Kenya. He was involved in preparing hundreds of people for operations inside Kenya and Ethiopia over the past ten years from his base in the Lower Shabelle ([HACRS](#), August 28).

The al-Shabaab commander was killed in a joint raid by the Somali National Army (SNA) and the United States. According to General Ismail Abdimalik of the SNA, Somali Special Forces (or Danab) approached a meeting of al-Shabaab militants in Saakow, killing "several." Commandos was killed in a separate U.S. airstrike during the raid ([Garowe Online](#), August 26).

Abdulkadir Commandos' death represents another setback for al-Shabaab at the hands of

the Somali National Army and the U.S. military. The United States has launched nearly 50 airstrikes this year, using these attacks to kill multiple senior al-Shabaab leaders. One such leader, Bashir Qorgab, was, like Commandos, killed near the town of Saakow, on February 22 (see [MLM](#), April 2). Yusuf Jiis, a founder of al-Shabaab and high-ranking leader of the group, was killed in an airstrike on April 2 ([North Africa Post](#), April 8). Commandos was involved in the mass training of new recruits and in military planning. He has been involved in insurgent movements in Somalia since the early 1990s. The loss of his years of experience could damage al-Shabaab's operations in the short-term.

In the long-term, however, Commandos' death is unlikely to have a large effect on the Somali insurgency. Despite the high tempo of airstrikes by the United States, al-Shabaab continues to frequently launch attacks in Mogadishu and the surrounding cities and towns. The group has maintained its revenue streams and continues to field a steady number of new recruits, and has demonstrated continued access to and ability to use improvised explosive devices. Though Commandos was a high-value target due to his direct connection to the training of al-Shabaab fighters, his death is unlikely to significantly reduce the Somali terrorist group's core capabilities.

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Will Egyptian-Born al-Qaeda Media Chief Husam Abd al-Rauf Succeed Zawahiri?

Shan A. Zain

Husam Abd al-Rauf is among the few remaining al-Qaeda figures with a public profile. A prolific contributor to al-Qaeda's jihadist productions and publications, al-Rauf has repeatedly threatened to target Western countries. He is credited with reviving and modernizing al-Qaeda's media operations, in particular the group's official outlet, al-Sahab. He is believed to be a close aide of the ailing al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and a key official involved in al-Qaeda's day-to-day operations. The al-Qaeda official, who is fluent in English, was the long-time editor of the group's now-defunct flagship magazine *Vanguards of Khorasan*. Earlier this year, the FBI added him to its list of most wanted terrorists, saying his crimes included conspiracy to kill U.S. nationals.

Education and Background

Hussam Abd al-Rauf, a.k.a. Abd-al-Hadi Mustafa, was born in Egypt in 1957. He is well educated, having graduated with a degree in agriculture from a university in Cairo in 1979. He studied English and joined the Egyptian Ministry of Agriculture in 1981, where he was in charge of handling the ministry's foreign relations. Al-Rauf also gained computer expertise, and in 1988 he turned down an offer to pursue higher education in the United States, citing his hatred for America ([Al-Marjie](#), August 1, 2019).

The al-Qaeda official started his jihadist career in 1986, when he joined hundreds of Arab fighters in Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet occupation. He stayed in the country for nine months before returning to Egypt. Following his

return, al-Rauf worked as a secretary and computer administrator in the office of the then-Egyptian Minister of Agriculture, Dr. Youssef Wali.

In 1989, al-Rauf and his wife moved to Pakistan and joined the Service Bureau, an organization in Peshawar co-founded by late al-Qaeda figures Abdalla al-Azzam and Osama bin Laden. During his stint with the bureau from 1989 to 1995, he took on various roles such as treasurer in the financial department, administrative manager, and a member of the editorial board of *al-Jihad* magazine, an Arabic monthly launched by Abdallah al-Azzam. In July 1995, al-Rauf and his family moved to Kabul to supervise some of the bureau's projects in three Afghan provinces ([Mobtada](#), August 20, 2018; [Daral Marif](#), January 13).

Role as al-Qaeda Propagandist

Al-Rauf got his first taste of media experience with al-Qaeda when he was made the editor of al-Qaeda's *Vanguards of Khorasan* magazine. He edited the publication beginning with its first issue that came out following the 7/7 London bombings in 2005. Al-Rauf also prolifically wrote in the magazine about al-Qaeda's jihadist ideology.

He wrote a number of articles and appeared in several videos propagating al-Qaeda's jihadist views and threatening attacks against the group's enemies. In 2006, for example, al-Rauf threatened attacks against Canada unless the country withdrew its troops from Afghanistan ([Al-Jazeera](#), October 29, 2006).

Al-Rauf's first appearance in a video produced by al-Qaeda's media arm al-Sahab was in June 2013 when the terrorist group sought to capitalize on the Arab Spring revolutions that were sweeping through several countries in the Middle East and North Africa. The lengthy documentary-style video was packed with

historical references and religious quotations, and centered on al-Rauf declaring the Arab Spring a failure in an attempt to convince Muslims that armed jihad was the only viable path to overthrowing repressive regimes in the region ([Emaad.net](#), June 28, 2013).

Although al-Rauf has delivered several key propaganda items for al-Qaeda, he has struggled in recent years to stay active and his public messages have been erratic. He was absent from al-Qaeda videos for three years, from 2015 to 2018. He reappeared in May 2018, issuing an audio message deriding U.S. President Donald Trump ([Emaad.net](#), May 22, 2018).

Al-Rauf has edited and abridged a series of old works by the brothers Sayyid and Muhammad Qutb, two Egyptian Islamist thinkers whose works have formed the ideological basis for modern jihadist groups. In an effort to appeal to new recruits, al-Sahab recently started disseminating the works via social media platforms. In an introduction, al-Rauf said the series was aimed at challenging the influence of Western ideologies, which, he argued, had contaminated the puritan version of Islam ([Emaad.net](#), June 3, 2019).

In 2014, al-Rauf delivered a key message denying reports of al-Qaeda's decline and claiming that the group was making inroads in various parts of the world ([Youm7](#), September 2014).

Current Role and al-Sahab Revival

Al-Rauf has been widely described as a close associate of the ailing al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. The veteran jihadist is a member of al-Qaeda's key strategy and information committee and is thought to have a crucial role in the management of the group's day-to-day operations. His appearance in several high-profile videos has prompted experts and media to suggest he is one of the people potentially being

considered to succeed the current al-Qaeda leader ([Al-Sharq al-Awsat](#), April 30). In an indication of his position within the group, in 2014, a letter sent by al-Qaeda's branch in Iraqi Kurdistan addressed al-Zawahiri along with al-Rauf ([Al-Marjie](#), August 1, 2019).

Al-Rauf was first identified as the head of al-Qaeda's media operations in July 2018. He has since taken major steps to upgrade al-Qaeda's media offerings and has introduced new magazines. He has streamlined the group's propaganda dissemination by ensuring a stable online presence for its official outlet, al-Sahab.

Under al-Rauf, the group launched a website for al-Sahab in 2018. That was the first time al-Qaeda started using an open website to directly communicate with its followers since its former website, al-Neda, was taken down in 2003. The al-Sahab website replaced online jihadist forums such as al-Fida.

Al-Sahab has maintained a stable online presence without much interruption until now, surviving a crackdown by tech companies. The website uses several advanced features to avoid suspension, such as the popular website security company Cloudflare for protection against DDoS attacks. As for its content, al-Sahab hosts a flurry of materials used by al-Qaeda to broaden its support base, including leadership messages, magazines, video productions etc. Al-Sahab has also notably amplified the messaging from the group's South Asia branch, hosting content in Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, as well as launching new platforms for dissemination.

In April of last year, al-Qaeda launched a new Arabic-language magazine called One Ummah (One Nation), a significant addition to al-Rauf's list of media projects. Al-Qaeda described it as a periodical that covers Muslim affairs. Five months later, the group launched the English version of the magazine on the anniversary of

the 9/11 attacks, with the clear intention of attracting more non-Arabic speakers. (Youn7, April 2019)

The magazine's content has been at times remarkable, and its editions have focused on current issues such as Black Lives Matter protests, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the ongoing economic recession. Al-Rauf has been a regular contributor to the publication and has written several articles propagating al-Qaeda's ideology, particularly targeting a younger audience. For example, in one article, he warned Muslim parents against exposing children to cartoons and video games, arguing they were being used by Western countries as part of an ideological invasion of the Muslim world (Emaad.net, August 2019). Under al-Rauf, al-Sahab has also experimented with social media platforms other than messaging service Telegram in the wake of relentless crackdown by tech companies and authorities.

Husam Abd al-Rauf is one of the key figures to watch out for amid growing uncertainty over al-Qaeda's leadership succession plans. Al-Rauf's long-term experience, dating back to the Soviet-Afghan War, have resulted in him acquiring wider leadership roles since the death of Osama bin Laden. The fact that the veteran jihadist is a top target of Western intelligence agencies is testimony to his indispensable role within the group. Al-Rauf has become one of the most effective promoters of al-Qaeda's jihadist worldview, authoring articles and being prominently featured in jihadist propaganda. While al-Qaeda has suffered major operational setbacks in recent years, its media—led by al-Rauf—thrived, challenging the perception that the group had become weak and irrelevant particularly in the wake of the emergence of its jihadist rival Islamic State.

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The Mysterious al-Shahab al-Mohajir—The New Emir of Islamic State-Khorasan

Farhan Zahid

Islamic State has selected a new emir for its branch in Afghanistan, Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K). In a surprising move, the Syrian-based central leadership of IS has chosen al-Shahab al-Mohajir—a foreign fighter, from Iraq—whose credentials are not widely known within the jihadist circles of South Asia or beyond.

His *nom de guerre* implies that he is a foreign fighter who was largely unknown up to his appointment by IS leadership. This article will attempt to analyze and assess al-Shahab based on the available sources. Little open source information exists on the subject, but sources within Islamist and jihadist circles in the region reveal his background and information about his appointment.

Background

The post of IS-K emir is a difficult and dangerous one. Four IS-K emirs have been killed in the past four years, and the most recent occupant of that position, Shaikh Aslam Farooqi, was arrested by Afghan security forces this year. [1] The IS-K emir faces not just one, but several threats, including the Afghan Taliban, U.S. forces, and Afghan security forces. U.S. drone strikes not only killed several IS-K emirs, but also devastated their camps and safe havens in the mountainous regions of Afghanistan's Nangarhar province. U.S. Special Forces embedded with Afghan forces have taken part in a number of raids against IS-K hideouts. In addition, strife within IS-K has divided the Afghanistan-based group into two major factions. The Maovia Uzbeki faction was routed by the Afghan Taliban in northern Afghanistan during the Battle of Darzab in Jowzjan province

in August 2018, while the faction previously led by Aslam Farooqi continued to operate in southeastern Afghanistan up until his arrest by Afghan security forces ([Al-Jazeera](#), April 20). Against this backdrop, IS-Central appointed al-Shahab al-Mohajir, an unknown figure, to lead IS-K.

The Appointment

According to a senior Islamabad-based security expert, al-Shahab is in fact an Iraqi national who has been living in the tribal areas of Pakistan for decades. He was formerly a low-ranking militant of al-Qaeda and settled in tribal areas after the start of the Global War on Terror in 2001, when he and hundreds of other on-the-run al-Qaeda militants sought refuge there. With the perceived weakening of al-Qaeda in the region and the rise of IS-K, he switched sides and pledged allegiance to then-Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The same source also reported that Shahab was part of the ‘Doctors’ Group,’ a faction within the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) umbrella organization, and was stationed in the Bajaur district of the tribal areas for years. Later, he moved to Afghanistan and was arrested. IS-K launched a prison-break operation at Jalalabad prison and rescued him in August 2020 ([Hindustan Times](#), August 5). [2]

According to another source, al-Shahab is perhaps Abu Muhammad Saeed Khorasani, a Syrian national who has long been active in the South Asian theater and likely joined IS after the organization established its chapter there in 2014. It is also possible that IS-Central did not want to reveal the true identity of its new South Asian Emir, due to the high casualty rate of its leaders and the high number of enemies operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He is allegedly a seasoned jihadist, and one of the masterminds behind high profile terrorist attacks in Kabul in recent years ([BBC Urdu](#), August 21).

The Islamic State’s official media wing for the region, al-Milat Media, has also confirmed the appointment of al-Shahab. Shahab released an audio message, which was announced by IS-K’s spokesperson Aziz Azzam in the local Pashto language ([Islam Media Analysis](#), September 15). One could easily assume from this message that the new Emir is not well-versed in the local languages.

Other sources allege that Shahab is a local jihadist who has been fighting alongside TTP before pledging allegiance to IS-K few years back, and that he is one of the few hundred foreign jihadists who decided to remain in the region. [3] [4] Some analysts have posited that a foreign militant leading IS-K might well be better able to manage the multiple disputes that exist within IS-K. A foreign emir may be more capable of resolving the rifts among a rank-and-file from different cultures and ethnicities. Recently, IS-K had to face internal divisions between the Maovia Uzbeki faction (comprising Central Asians and former militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) and the Aslam Farooqi faction (comprising mostly Pakistanis and former militants of TTP). The schism badly damaged IS-K, and Afghan and U.S. security forces and the Taliban took full advantage of this, defeating the group in northern Afghanistan and in its southeastern strongholds of Nangarhar and Loya Paktia. The choice of al-Shahab as the new emir might lure in fresh recruits and those who were disillusioned by the infighting. An Arab emir could attract members of other jihadists groups to join IS-K. IS-K needs to reinvigorate itself in order to capitalize on potential defectors from the Afghan Taliban, who may become disillusioned by the Taliban’s peace talks with the U.S. and Afghan government.

What’s Next?

Al-Shahab’s audio message was read by the spokesperson of IS-K, suggesting he may not be

fluent in local Afghan languages. This could hamper recruitment efforts and the mobilization of local supporters. Appointing a foreign emir represents a new experiment for IS-Central. The new emir is allegedly a veteran jihadist and could accelerate the pace of IS-K operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He seems to have links to jihadist circles of the region.

Conclusion

IS-K is a resilient organization. Even after suffering blows from the Afghan Taliban, U.S. and Afghan security forces, including drone strikes, the organization is still managing to operate in Afghanistan and is also surviving in Pakistan. While it is too early to say what new initiatives IS-K will carry out under its new emir, it is likely that the group will step up terrorist strikes in order to let al-Shahab prove himself. He will also attempt to recruit foreign fighters to join the ranks of IS-K. It is possible that some disgruntled Afghan Taliban militants will join a new IS-K under a veteran Arab jihadist. Security policymakers of the region need to re-evaluate the situation by devising a concrete policy to keep the pressure on IS-K.

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Notes

[1] Past IS-K emirs include: Hafiz Saeed Orakzai (2015-16), Abdul Haseeb Logari (2016-17), Abdul Rehman Ghaleb (2017), Abu Saad Erhabi (2017-2018), Shaikh Aslam Farooqi (2018-2020)

[2] Discussions with Mohammad Amir Rana, Director of Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS), in Islamabad on September 21.

[3] Discussions with an Islamabad based journalist on September 18.

[4] Discussions with a security expert on the subject matter, September 15.

Sheikh Salah Hablas: The Idlib Leader Facing Down Salafi-Jihadism and the Assad Regime

Manhal Bareesh

Introduction

Negotiations between Russia and Turkey in Ankara on September 16 over the present situation in Syria's Idlib governorate yielded no tangible results. The failure of the talks opens the door for the Bashar al-Assad regime and its Russian allies to attempt a seizure of the governorate by force. Such a scenario could see the Salafist-jihadist organization Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the leading rebel group in Idlib governorate, defeated and driven out of the area, to the benefit of local elites who have long resisted their presence.

HTS is currently well established as the leading rebel group in Idlib governorate. Despite Damascus successfully gaining control of large segments of the governorate, HTS remains the most influential militant faction. However, despite the group's entrenchment in Idlib, it has failed to successfully embed itself into the local society due to local civilians' negative reaction to the Salafist group's attempt to dominate the local economy and impose a harsher Islamist ideology.

Local elites have been able to take the local discontent of northwestern Syrians and translate it into action against HTS, keeping the group from completely dominating this section of the war-torn country. Understanding these local elites and their regional networks of influence is key to understanding the complicated conflict that is gripping this area. Furthermore, HTS' potential defeat by Assad's forces would give these local leaders opportunities to expand their own influence. One such local leader who

successfully organized and led local fighters against both Islamic State (IS) and HTS, and stands to have a bigger role in a post-HTS region, is Sheikh Salah Hablas.

Background

Hablas comes from an influential conservative family, based in the village of Hazano in Idlib governorate, that is well-known in the region for its opposition to the Syrian regime since the 1980s. The sheikh has a brother who was killed in the 1980 Palmyra prison massacre of political detainees. The killings were carried out by the Defense Companies, a paramilitary organization led by General Rifat al-Assad, brother of the late Syrian President Hafez al-Assad. Hablas has another brother who was imprisoned for nearly 20 years, also in Palmyra, and was released at the end of the 1990s. A third brother has been detained by the Syrian regime for the past several years.

Sheikh Hablas' family is also known to be traditional members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. However, Hablas has kept his distance from the Brotherhood and its military arm in Syria, represented by the Sham Legion. He has preferred not to approach or be affiliated with the organization in any way. The Sham Legion, however, is well established in the areas surrounding Hablas' home base of Hazano. The influential commander-in-chief of the Sham Legion, Colonel Fadlallah al-Hajji, is from the nearby village of Kafr Yahmoul, and most of the military commanders are also from the surrounding areas.

Managing Local Tensions and Forming the Fudoul Alliance

In the early years of the civil war in 2011 and 2012, Hablas played an important role in easing tension that had been building between the two Shia towns of Al-Fu'ah and Kafariyyah, north of Idlib. He also was able to convince neighboring

Sunnis to join the revolution against the Assad regime. He pressured some opposition groups into releasing Shia civilians working in government institutions, including Zain al-Din, director of the Agricultural Bank in the town of Maar Tamasrin, who was a Shia from the neighboring town of Kafria. [1]

On May 25, 2013, Sheikh Hablas announced the formation of the Fudoul Alliance in opposition to the expansion of Islamist groups and the emergence of extremists, such as Islamic State (IS). Hablas was instrumental in working with and organizing the local leaders, village notables, military officers, and judges who had defected from the Syrian government to establish the alliance ([YouTube](#), May 28, 2013). In his statement announcing the formation of the organization, Hablas stated three goals: changing the direction of the revolution against the Assad regime away from the Islamist direction it was heading; supporting oppressed Syrians, regardless of their religion, nationality, race and sect; and working to achieve security and peace by addressing sectarian and separatist strife.

The alliance's emergence was a major challenge to Islamist factions. Hablas took care of the privacy of minorities, including Christians, Shias, and Druze. Eighteen Druze villages are located in the Jabal al-Summaq region of Idlib governorate, near Hablas' town of Hizano.

The Fudoul Alliance attempted to present itself as an alternative opposition institution inside Syria. The group quickly announced its military and civilian leaderships, headed by the dissident Brigadier General Abdullah Harraq and a lawyer, Abd al-Rahman Allaf, respectively ([YouTube](#), May 28, 2013; [YouTube](#), May 29, 2013).

Reaction to Chemical Weapons Attack in Eastern Ghouta

On August 22, 2013, after the Syrian regime bombed Eastern Ghouta, a rural suburban area near Damascus, with chemical weapons, the leaders of the opposition fronts and military councils announced the cessation of cooperation with the decision-making countries of the UN Security Council, until an international investigation committee was formed. The opposition leaders threatened to resign from their posts, and called on their commander, then-Chief of Staff of the opposition, Major General Salim Idris to resign if the necessary military support was not provided. The group stated that the National Coalition, which is the political representative of the opposition, had lost legitimacy. Sheikh Hablas supported the statement, and stood alongside leaders of the Aleppo and Idlib military opposition as it was read in a video recording. [2]

Fight Against Islamic State

The month of September 2013 was decisive for IS' presence in northwestern Syria. During this time, Islamic State attempted to assassinate Sheikh Hablas in an ambush, severely injuring him and killing a companion ([Zamanalwsl](#), September 15, 2013). The Fudoul Alliance arrested the perpetrators of the attack, and IS eventually launched an assault on the town of Hazano in order to rescue the perpetrators. Alliance fighters repelled the attack and killed 20 IS operatives. Among those killed was an Islamic State emir from the nearby town of Dana, Abu Abdullah al-Libi ([Aawsat](#), September 24, 2013). On September 18, IS took control of Azaz, north of Aleppo, and tried to seize the Bab al-Salama border crossing with Turkey ([Al-Quds](#), September 23, 2013). This action had the effect of enlarging the coalition against IS in Syria, and encouraged the Fudoul Alliance to take a clear decision to mobilize against it.

On September 30, 2013, IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani released a blistering statement against various opposition groups and factions. Al-Adnani accused Hablas and the Fudoul Alliance of having sided with the “crusaders” to fight against his organization and claimed he had conclusive evidence of the partnership.

Days later, IS maneuvered to ease tensions between it and the Fudoul Alliance, releasing a statement referring to Hablas as a “brother in religion” ([Zamanalwsl](#), October 4, 2013). This change in IS policy toward the alliance was short lived, as factions from the Aleppo countryside organized under the Jaysh al-Mujahideen umbrella group in order to fight IS. Jaysh al-Mujahideen was a smaller coalition that worked closely with the Fudoul Alliance and collaborated militarily with Hablas himself, who acted as a political leader for the group. The clashes resulted in the death of Abu Saber al-Tunisi, the IS emir in Atarib, near Hazano.

Sheikh Hablas’ Role in the HTS-SLF Fighting

On February 26, 2018, Sheikh Salah Hablas appeared, for the first time in several years, on social media, while fighting was taking place between HTS and the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF), a coalition of Islamist and revolutionary factions. The SLF coalition notably included the Nour al-Din al-Zanki movement, the largest opposition faction in the western countryside of Aleppo, and the Ahrar al-Sham movement.

During the fighting, the majority of Idlib’s towns erupted in protest against HTS forces, staging multiple demonstrations against the Salafist group. In one such protest, hundreds of demonstrators gathered at Hablas’ house and chanted, "Sheikh Salah ... God protect you" and "With our souls and blood we sacrifice, Sheikh Salah" ([Facebook](#), August 17, 2017).

Sheikh Hablas had previously warned HTS not to launch hostilities against the coalition, reminding the group that the SLF provided safety to elements of HTS in 2014 during the war against Islamic State. Security had been provided to HTS members on the condition that they remain at home and not interfere in the active fighting with IS ([YouTube](#), February 26, 2018).

Hablas played a large role in persuading factions that had previously retired from fighting to return to the frontlines against HTS. Hablas played a similar role organizing factions and tribes in Idlib to fight in the war against IS in 2013. However, local and international circumstances had changed dramatically. The most important of these changes is the cessation of U.S. support for the factions fighting the Assad regime.

During the conflict with the SLF, HTS surrounded the Hablas’ hometown of Hazano and attempted to storm it several times ([Smart News Agency](#), February 26, 2018; [YouTube](#), February 26, 2018). HTS attacked Hazano because local fighters were blocking a road that would have allowed HTS to reach the strongholds of the Nour al-Din Zanki movement in the northern countryside of Aleppo. Hablas attempted to motivate the town's fighters to counter the attack by giving speeches that were broadcast through loudspeakers in the local mosque ([Twitter.com/abo987khaled](#), February 25, 2018). Sheikh Hablas' failure to assemble various local factions to counteract HTS resulted in the end of clashes. Hazano was largely spared from fighting, and the town's revolutionaries did not attempt further to interrupt the HTS convoys.

Conclusion

Today, Sheikh Hablas maintains a much lower profile in comparison to his initial activism at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, and now

avoids making public appearances. Despite this, Hablas maintains a venerated status among the people of northern Idlib. He is a popular religious figure, especially in his home base of Hazano. Hablas has not lost influence in the area after a nearly 18-month absence. His past injuries from IS' assassination attempt and fear of further attempts of his life seem to have resulted in a temporary retreat from public life for much of the past few years. Hablas reappeared in early 2018, to great local fanfare. Local leaders, activists, and rural notables quickly rallied around him.

Hablas has inspired a fervent following among average Syrians, having shown an alternative governing model for the region that stands apart from the Salafist mold. Idlib has experienced multiple Salafist-jihadist militias in power, including the Islamic Ahrar al-Sham movement, Jaysh al-Islam, Islamic State, and more recently, HTS.

Although Sheikh Hablas is not currently active on social media, his home in Hazano remains a daily destination for dignitaries, factional leaders, and activists. While his home has lost its traditional role as a place for negotiation and reconciliation, it nevertheless remains a gathering place where people can freely exchange news and opinions and coordinate their actions. Sheikh Hablas still plays a major role in bringing together divergent opinions and mobilizing the public. Hablas, practically speaking, oversees much of the day-to-day activities of the western countryside of Idlib, and he is well suited to play a regional political role in the future, when and if his political moment arrives.

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Notes

[1] “My experience in the Syrian revolution, Kufra and Al Foah ... and Idlib countryside (personal testimony)”. Khatib Suit, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies 2017 <https://bookstore.dohainstitute.org/p-1333.aspx>

[2] Statement by the leaders of the fronts regarding the chemical weapons massacre in Damascus ([YouTube](#), August 22, 2013).

Al-Qaeda's Man in Syria: A Post-Mortem Profile of Hurras al-Din Leader Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni

Ludovico Carlino

On June 14, two senior al-Qaeda leaders were reportedly killed in a suspected U.S. drone strike in Syria's Idlib province while traveling in their car ([Alaraby.com](#), June 15). According to video circulated on social media, the vehicle was struck with a R9X, a version of the Hellfire missile that has been used by the U.S. military for previous targeted killings in Syria. [1] The two jihadists were later identified as Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni and Bilal al-Sanaani, senior leaders of the Syrian-based al-Qaeda affiliate Hurras al-Din. What follows is a post-mortem profile of Abu al-Qassam, a long-standing al-Qaeda veteran whose death is likely to deprive al-Qaeda of a strategic link between its general leadership and Syria.

Al-Zarqawi's Comrade in Jordan and Afghanistan

Khaled Mustafa Khalifa al-Arouri, also known as Abu Ashraf or Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni, was born in 1967 in Zarqa, northern Jordan, to parents of Palestinian origin from Ramallah ([Akhbaralaan](#), June 17). It was in this small town north of Jordan's capital Amman where, at the beginning of the 1990s, he met Abu Musab al-Zarqawi at a local mosque. Al-Zarqawi would later become the founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the predecessor of Islamic State. In Jordan, Abu al-Qassam and al-Zarqawi gradually developed a close friendship. The two became nearly inseparable from 1993 onwards due to shared experiences and a mutual commitment to militancy.

Little is known about al-Urduni's early years. One account suggests that he joined the Muslim Brotherhood when he was teenager, eventually becoming a member of the hardline Falcon Movement, in which he developed a certain admiration for Hamas and the al-Qassam Brigades (from which his nickname probably originated from) ([24.ac](#), September 15, 2019). Al-Qassam was likely already gravitating around militant jihadist circles in Zarqa in those years. In March 1994, he was arrested due to his involvement in the so-called 'Bay'at al-Imam' case. Bay'at al-Imam is the group that al-Zarqawi tried to establish in Jordan upon his return from Afghanistan, where he first gained battle experience. He was sentenced to a prison term with al-Zarqawi in the Swaqa prison, in southern Jordan, until 1999, an experience that further grew their friendship. In 1999, the two young Jordanians were released after a royal pardon and quickly left for Afghanistan via Pakistan ([Alwatanvoice](#), May 26, 2005).

Once in Afghanistan, Abu al-Qassam likely became a confidant or deputy to al-Zarqawi. The latter was quickly approached by senior al-Qaeda figures who offered specialized training, funding, and logistics for al-Zarqawi's militant group in Herat, with a view to coordinating the efforts of the disparate groups of Arab mujahideen flooding Afghanistan at that time ([Alarabiya.net](#), January 17, 2017). Al-Zarqawi eventually accepted the proposal to run the Herat training camp, but only after consultations with Abu al-Qassam and following a meeting in which he requested al-Qassam's presence, a demand that reflected his place in al-Zarqawi's inner circle of close associates. It was during this period that Abu al-Qassam married al-Zarqawi's sister and assisted him in establishing the first nucleus of Arab jihadists in Herat, which would later become the backbone of al-Qaeda in Iraq. Before beginning to run the training camp, it is reported that al-Zarqawi and al-Qassam underwent 45 days of specialized training in

another al-Qaeda camp in Waziristan, Pakistan (Alarabiya.net, January 17, 2017).

The Iranian Sanctuary

Abu al-Qassam remained at the Herat camp until November 2001. The 9/11 attacks on the United States carried out by al-Qaeda and the consequent U.S. military intervention in the country forced al-Zarqawi's group to flee Afghanistan for Iran. But while al-Zarqawi managed to travel from Iran to Iraqi Kurdistan in 2002, Abu al-Qassam remained in Iran, where at some point he was taken into custody by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards along with other al-Qaeda members and placed under house arrest (Aawsat, June 15). During his time in Iran, however, al-Qassam continued to enjoy some freedom to maneuver and continued to support al-Zarqawi efforts in Iraq, likely with the backing of other al-Qaeda operatives who exploited the favorable Iranian environment. According to Jean-Charles Brisard's book, *Zarqawi: The New Face of Al-Qaeda*, he served as al-Zarqawi's key liaison with Ansar al-Islam (an al-Qaeda affiliated group in Kurdistan at that time) and was Zarqawi's "man for special missions in Iraq and abroad," a role that once again confirms his ascendant status within the global al-Qaeda network. [2] According to Biscard, Moroccan authorities also claimed that he had links to the May 2003 suicide bombings in Casablanca, as he sent \$70,000 to a local jihadist who used the money to finance the attack. Abu al-Qassam spent some 13 years in prison before being released by Iranian authorities in March 2015. He would never again meet al-Zarqawi, who was killed in an airstrike in Iraq in 2006 (al-Jazeera, June 8, 2006).

Al-Qaeda's Man in Syria

Abu al-Qassam was freed as part of a prisoner exchange, whereby five senior al-Qaeda members, including him, were released and allowed to relocate in Syria in exchange for an

Iranian diplomat who had been held hostage in Yemen by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (Alabasirah, January 15, 2018). Among the other prisoners released were Saif al-Adl, who played a key role in helping Abu al-Qassam and al-Zarqawi establish the training camp in Herat while they were in Afghanistan (Alwatanvoice, May 26, 2005).

The first information to surface about Abu al-Qassam following his release came at the end of 2015, when a Jordanian media outlet reported his arrival to the liberated areas of northern Syria, which coincided with the visit of a delegation of the most prominent Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) leaders from southern Syria (JordanZad, December 25, 2015). It is likely that the group moved to northern Syria to meet with Abu al-Qassam, who, from then on, played a key role in ensuring that al-Qaeda would remain present in Syria. Some local reporting also speculated that this group, including al-Qassam, was actually the so-called 'Khorasan Group,' a group of al-Qaeda veterans sent to Syria under the direction of al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, to establish a safe haven from which to plot attacks on the West (Alarabiya.net, January 17, 2017). Information corroborating this is not available in open sources, but it is indisputable that al-Qassam was operating on behalf of al-Qaeda in Syria. That is indicated by the fact that he was part of a Shura Council (or consultative body) specifically appointed to pull JaN closer to al-Qaeda's agenda (Alabasirah, January 15, 2018).

It is not surprising that al-Qassam gradually became more involved in the jihadist infighting that broke out in northwestern Syria in July 2016, when JaN leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani rebranded his group Jabath Fatah al-Sham (JFS) and announced its disassociation from al-Qaeda. Months later, in January 2017, JFS merged with several other jihadist entities to form Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Al-Julani's moves became highly controversial within

jihadi circles, with some al-Qaeda veterans inside Syria objecting to JaN publicly distancing itself from al-Qaeda. One of the men who objected to JaN's rebranding was Abu al-Qassam, who in 2017 was reported to be touring camps run by HTS, urging its members to defect from al-Julani's group and instead reaffirm their allegiance to al-Qaeda ([Alabasirah](#), January 15, 2018). These tensions eventually escalated even further, when HTS at the end of 2017 launched a campaign of arrests targeting senior al-Qaeda members in Syria and raiding Abu al-Qassam's home in the north of the country ([Almodon](#), November 28, 2017). Al-Qassam's strict loyalty to al-Qaeda's agenda was further reiterated in February 2018, when the Jordanian was among the jihadists behind the establishment of Tandheem Hurras al-Din, which translates as 'The Organization for the Guardians of the Religion.' [3] The group was unofficially the re-emergent al-Qaeda branch in Syria following HTS's disassociation from al-Qaeda and the infighting that followed al-Julani's move.

Directed by al-Qaeda's emir Ayman al-Zawahiri, the idea behind the formation of Hurras al-Din was to return to the model of the 'vanguard elite' traditionally embraced in the days of Osama bin Laden. Al-Qaeda's intended strategy was to discourage its branches and subordinate groups from trying to control or rule territories (as the Islamic State did in Syria and Iraq); to avoid forming relations with foreign governments or other groups not ideologically committed to the idea of jihad; and to follow an explicit military strategy focused on both the near enemy (the local Arab governments) and the far enemy (the United States and its allies) in the West. Accordingly, Abu al-Qassam played a key role in shaping this path by becoming the group's deputy emir, testament to the trust and deference he enjoyed in jihadist circles and reflective of the core al-Qaeda concepts shaping his jihadist ideology. A source quoted in local media suggested that he was actually appointed by al-

Zawahiri to be one of the deputy leaders of al-Qaeda, replacing Abu Hammam al-Shami as emir of Hurras al-Din. He was also one of at least two Hurras al-Din members occupying a seat on the 12-strong al-Qaeda Shura Council, suggesting that the Syrian group is a main recipient of al-Qaeda efforts and that al-Qassam steadily managed to get to the top of the al-Qaeda global network ([Alghad.com](#), September 15, 2019).

The Significance of al-Qassam's Death

According to local media, al-Qassam was killed while traveling to meet HTS and other commanders to discuss the establishment of an Idlib operations room and unify jihadist efforts to fight back against a potential major government offensive against the latest jihadist bastion in northern Syria ([Khaberni.com](#), June 25). [4] The al-Qaeda leadership has often urged jihadists in Syria to put aside their differences and focus their efforts against the Syrian government, their common enemy, and al-Qassam's initiative was in line with this thinking. His death will probably not have an immediate impact on the group's short-term trajectory, given the presence of other al-Qaeda veterans within its ranks. However, it deprives Hurras al-Din and the overall jihadist environment in Syria of a key high-ranking al-Qaeda leader with years of militant experience in the most important jihadist theaters of recent decades. Most importantly, it deprives al-Qaeda of a strategic link between its general leadership and the Syria arena, reducing in the long-term the space for al-Qaeda to continue in its bid to shape the trajectory of the Syrian jihad.

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Notes

[1] <https://twitter.com/KyleWOorton/status/1273227536475004928>

[2] Jean-Charles Brisard: *Zarqawi: The New Face of Al-Qaeda*, July 2005

[3] <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2018/03/01/a-new-branch-of-al-qaeda-emerges-in-syria/>

[4] See [Terrorism Monitor Volume: 18 Issue: 13](#)

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