



# MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

## Personalities Behind the Insurgency

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#### Akram al-Kaabi: Iranian-Backed Militia Leader Threatens American Presence in Iraq

*John Foulkes*

On October 28, Akram al-Kaabi, a Shia cleric and secretary-general of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN), threatened to launch “lethal attacks” against the United States, unless the country completely withdraws from Iraq. At a press conference in Tehran, Al-Kaabi stated: “Not only the various groups of the resistance in Iraq but also all Iraqi people from all walks of life are calling for the withdrawal of American troops. Eventually, the Americans will have to leave Iraq and go home forever” ([Shafaq](#), October 28; [Tehran Times](#), October 28). The militia leader’s comments are the latest in a long career challenging American influence in Iraq.

On September 9, the head of U.S. Central Command General Frank McKenzie announced a drawdown of troops in Iraq from 5,200 to 3,000. U.S. forces have been withdrawing from the country throughout the past year, handing over eight bases to Iraqi security forces. The American military presence in Iraq has since

been consolidated to locations in Baghdad, Irbil and in the western section of the country in Ain al-Asad ([Al Jazeera](#), September 9; [Anadolu Agency](#), August 1).

Al-Kaabi first joined the insurgency following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. He quickly joined Muqtada al-Sadr’s Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), becoming a commander in the organization. He was designated as a specially designated global terrorist by the U.S. State Department in 2008 for planning and conducting multiple attacks against the Iraqi government and coalition forces ([U.S. State Department](#), March 5, 2019). Kaabi was one of the founders of Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), which was an offshoot of JAM trained by Hezbollah operatives with support and funding from Iran. AAH broke off from JAM when al-Sadr accepted a ceasefire with coalition forces in 2004.

Al-Kaabi claims that following the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, he handed all of his responsibilities over to AAH founder and leader Qais al-Khazali in order to complete his Shia religious studies (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), February 4). He has stated that he formed HHN in response to Islamic State (IS)

seizing large amount of territory in Syria and Iraq in 2013. Al-Kaabi has denied that he split from AAH, but has said that they have not united due to disagreements over style and policy ([al-Monitor](#), March 16, 2015).

HHN was one of the first Iraqi militia groups to send fighters to Syria to assist the regime of Bashar al-Assad, sending fighters beginning soon after the uprising began in 2012 and 2013, and provided important contributions to several battles and campaigns. The militia took part in the regime's 2015 campaign to seize southern Aleppo and assisted in breaking the sieges of Nubl and Zahraa ([al-Masdr News](#), December 16, 2015). During their operations in Aleppo, HHN was accused of involvement in the killing of 82 civilians ([TRT World](#), December 15, 2016). The militia also took part in fighting in eastern Damascus and in Hama, and against IS in southeastern Syria.

In March 2019, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned al-Kaabi, HHN, and its media affiliate, Nujaba TV, citing the group's closeness to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC)-Quds Force then leader Qasem Soleimani and Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah ([The National](#), March 6, 2019; [U.S. State Department](#), March 5, 2019).

Following the U.S. airstrike that killed Qasem Soleimani and Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) Deputy Chairman Abu Mahdi and Kata'ib Hezbollah commander al-Muhandis on January 3, 2020, al-Kaabi joined other PMU leaders in calling for revenge. HHN is part of the PMU umbrella of Shia militias—sponsored and supported by the Iraqi government—and operated under the organization in the campaign against Islamic State in Iraq. He attended al-Muhandis' funeral, and soon after organized a meeting with Moqtada al-Sadr and several PMU militia leaders at his office to discuss a response to the U.S. airstrike and how to present a united

front. HHN reportedly acted as a facilitator within the PMU following al-Muhandis' death, though Kata'ib Hezbollah still occupied a central role within the organization. Al-Kaabi gained prominence during this period as a result of being photographed with Esmail Ghaani, Soleimani's successor as head of the IRGC-Quds Force ([al-Monitor](#), January 28).

On October 10, the new Iraqi Resistance Committee, consisting of the Iranian-supported militias in Iraq, announced a ceasefire agreement with U.S. forces, contingent on Iraqi authorities presenting a timetable for their withdrawal (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), October 23). Though the ceasefire statement did not include the names of the militias that signed onto the agreement, al-Kaabi, who traveled to Tehran several days before the announcement to consult with Iranian military officials, held a press conference on October 28 to explain the Iraqi Resistance Committee's decision. He explained that the committee agreed to the ceasefire with three conditions. First, they demanded a clear timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq; second, that the United States cease operating in Iraqi airspace; and third, that the United States cease interfering in Iraq's internal affairs. Al-Kaabi claimed that the Iraqi Resistance Committee agreed to the ceasefire because unnamed Iraqi politicians said that the U.S. needed a face-saving withdrawal from the country and time to implement it ([Tehran Times](#), October 28).

Al-Kaabi's recent comments in Tehran will likely hasten the divisions emerging within the PMU. Broadly speaking, the Iraqi Shia militias are divided between those who support Tehran and their governing ideology, *wilayat al-fiqh* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), and those who follow the Najaf clergy, led by Ali al-Sistani, who is the highest Shia religious authority in Iraq. Militia leaders and influential politicians making up the latter camp have criticized the

pro-Iranian militias' attacks on the U.S. embassy in Iraq, implicitly supporting Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's efforts to curtail the influence of the former. AAH leader Qais al-Khazali, historically close to al-Kaabi, said the attacks on the U.S. embassy were legitimate, saying it is, "a military base of an occupying force" ([Arab News](#), October 26; [al-Monitor](#), September 28; see [Terrorism Monitor](#), October 23). AAH is believed by locals to be responsible for the recent kidnapping of 12 Sunni men in Salahuddin province on October 19. Eight of the 12 men have since been discovered dead ([Al-Monitor](#), October 19; [Alaraby.co.uk](#), October 23). On October 17, marchers holding PMU flags burned down the Baghdad headquarters of the Kurdish Democratic Party after the Iraqi Foreign Minister, who is a Kurd, said the capital and Green Zone must be "cleansed" of the militias and PMU ([Kurdistan24](#), October 17). These recent developments have spurred fears of a return to the sectarian violence that has plagued Iraq in the past.

Should such violence return, al-Kaabi will be at the forefront, protecting and promoting Iranian interests. Al-Kaabi has openly admitted that Iran funds, trains, and arms HHN, and has gone so far as to say that he would overthrow the government in Baghdad if ordered to by the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ([al-Monitor](#), March 16, 2015). He commands an estimated 10,000 fighters in Iraq, who are veterans of the campaigns against opposition groups and Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. The current ceasefire, which is keeping the Iranian-supported militias from targeting U.S. facilities and forces in the country, is unlikely to hold, as Prime Minister Kadhimi and other factions still see the American presence as being required to maintain stability and are unlikely to present a timetable for U.S. withdrawal as requested. If and when the Iranian-backed militias, including HHN, start attacking U.S. facilities again, one should expect to see al-Kaabi

justifying the attacks and supporting Iranian influence in Iraq.

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## Islamic State War Returnee Jailed for Life in India— Subahani Haja Mohideen

*Animesh Roul*

In late September, a special Indian National Investigating Agency (NIA) counter-terrorism court in Ernakulam, Kerala, sentenced Islamic State (IS) terrorist Subahani Haja Mohideen (a.k.a. Abu Jasmine al-Hindi) to life imprisonment ([NIA](#), September 28; [The Hindu](#), September 28). He was one of the early Indian-origin extremists who flocked to Syria and Iraq to fight alongside the transnational jihadist group. Upon his return to India on September 21, 2015, he conspired with members of the IS-affiliated group Ansar-al-Khilafa-Kerala (AaK-K), having received instructions from his handlers abroad to carry out terrorist attacks in India. He attempted to procure chemical explosives from the city of Sivakasi in the Virudhunagar district of Tamil Nadu ([Hindustan Times](#), October 7, 2016).

Surprisingly, Indian authorities did not know that Haja Mohideen was an IS returnee and a young radical in his native Thodupuzha in Kerala's Idukki district. His name first came to the attention of authorities in a case pertaining to an anti-India conspiracy by a self-proclaimed Islamic State unit, AaK-K, in October 2016. AaK-K was reportedly formed by Shajeer Abdulla Mangalassery, who migrated from Kerala to Nangarhar, Afghanistan, to join Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) province in mid-2016 ([New Indian Express](#), June 20, 2017). However, the group was later led by Manseed Mehmood (a.k.a. Abu Omar al-Hindi), an extremist who once worked in Qatar and, along with several other youths, pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Manseed and his followers attempted to recruit and indoctrinate young Muslims using social media

platforms, plotting to perpetrate violence against targeted politicians, judges, police officers, Ahmadi Muslims, and foreign tourists (e.g. Jewish tourists) visiting places like Vattakanal in Kodaikanal, Kerala ([Manorama Online](#), August 11, 2017).

The six members of the group were arrested on October 2, 2016 while holding a secret meeting at Kananakamala in Kannur. In November 2019, a special court of the NIA, India's elite counter-terrorism agency, in Ernakulam, Kerala convicted the six members of AaK-K, including the leader Manseed, under various sections of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) ([Outlook India](#), November 27, 2019).

While investigating the AaK-K case in early October 2016, NIA unearthed information about Haja Mohideen, who had plans to wage holy war under the banner of Islamic State, after spending approximately six months between April and September 2015 fighting with an IS unit in Iraq. Upon his return to India, Haja Mohideen operated from his residence in the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu. He purportedly planned to carry out terrorist attacks in India with the Manseed-led group to further IS objectives. A raid on his house in Tirunelveli led to his arrest on October 5, 2016, and yielded details regarding his brief but deadly association with IS.

Mohideen reportedly traveled to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia from Chennai, India on April 8, 2015, on the pretext of performing *umrah* (religious pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia). Later, he went to Istanbul before entering Syria illegally, without a valid permit. According to the NIA document, he underwent religious and firearms training before being deployed with an IS military unit named Umar Ibnu Khatab Khatiba in Mosul, Iraq. The unit, which consisted of foreign fighters from Tajikistan, Algeria, Lebanon and several Southeast Asian countries, was headed by a French jihadist with the *nom de*

*guerre* Abu Suleiman al-Francisi ([Indian Express](#), October 31, 2016). Haja Mohideen was also found to be associated with Pakistani national Mohammed Usman Ghani, a Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) operative who later joined IS. Ghani was reportedly later arrested and jailed in France for his involvement in the November 13, 2015 Paris attacks ([New Indian Express](#), December 4, 2018).

Media sources and NIA investigations reveal some preliminary information about Haja Mohideen's formative years. The information tracks his journey to the warzone and sheds light on his transformation from an ordinary individual into a rabid Islamist. He began his early schooling at secular mainstream education centers, including the Saraswathi Vidhya Bhavan and Vimala School in Thodupuzha, Kerala. Later, he completed an engineering course and briefly worked for the company Infotech in Chennai in 2010. He eventually returned to work at his family's garment shop in Thodupuzha. Introverted, alcoholic and disoriented, he displayed no inclination toward religion until in 2013, when he joined Tablighi Jamaat, an orthodox Sunni Muslim movement based in South Asia that advocates for a return to practicing Islam as the Prophet Muhammad did in his lifetime ([The Hindu](#), January 8, 2017).

Haja Mohideen, by then a married man, began his journey toward Islam and started to study the Koran and the *hadiths* (a collection of sayings by the Prophet Mohammad). This interest in exploring and acquiring Islamic knowledge led him online, particularly to the Kalamullah.com website, where he was reportedly influenced by the lectures of al-Qaeda ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki. [1] Mohideen subsequently became fascinated with IS' ideology. Using social media applications like Facebook, Twitter, Telegram and Kik, he befriended several extremists, including a Moroccan and a Swede, who urged him to undertake the journey to the so-called

caliphate. After a brief stint fighting in the region, he developed cold feet and was jailed in Raqqa for trying to escape from IS.

Haja Mohideen's association with Usman Ghani and Abu Suleiman al-Francisi led French authorities to interrogate Mohideen several times in the Trissur jail in Kerala. The French team and NIA officials have cross-examined both Ghani and Mohideen several times in the last few years ([One India](#), December 7, 2018; [Manorama Online](#), December 28, 2017). His testimony, about such things as his meeting with Indian jihadists in Raqqa and Mosul and how he left IS, has not been corroborated with on-the-ground details. [2]

Of late, the NIA has discovered that the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala are major centers for pro-IS activities in the country. Recent investigations into Islamist radicalization in Kerala revealed that places like Kannur and Kasaragod witnessed a spike in migrations to IS territories between 2014 and 2016. Between May 2014 and December 2019, the NIA arrested 177 individuals (both members and sympathizers) for their links with IS. According to information shared by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in early February this year, the largest number of arrests were made in Tamil Nadu and Kerala ([News Minute](#), February 18). The spurt in travel to IS territories coincided with the ascendance of the IS-led caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Cases ranged from radicalized youths traveling to the Middle East and Afghanistan, to individuals engaging in virtual jihadist propaganda and conspiracy, to others staging violent attacks against the Indian government. The number of such incidents has increased since, with more IS affiliates and individuals like Haja Mohideen coming into the open in southern India and elsewhere in the country.

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## Notes

[1] “Kalamullah: in the shades of Quran” is an online repository of Islamic literature and showcased audio and video lectures of leading Islamists scholars and ideologues for free. See, <http://kalamullah.com/>

[2] Vijita Singh, “From tippler to a terrorist — IS fighter recounts journey to Syria”, *The Hindu*, January 8, 2017, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/From-tippler-to-terrorist—-IS-fighter-recounts-journey-to-Syria/article17006924.ece>

## The Phenomenon of Gulmurod Khalimov: Is Islamic State’s War Minister Really Dead?

*Sergey Sukhankin*

### Introduction

On August 3, Tajikistan’s Minister of Internal Affairs Rahimzoda Ramazon announced that Gulmurod Khalimov was killed in an airstrike in Syria. This was later confirmed by Tajikistani nationals returning from Syria ([Sputniknews.ru](http://Sputniknews.ru), August 3). Later, however, Rakhimzoda stated that he would not believe the news until he had seen the body ([Sputniknews.ru](http://Sputniknews.ru), February 14). Indeed, given Khalimov numerous “deaths”—he was reported to have been killed three times, once in 2015 and twice in 2017—the story of the “rebellious colonel” could indeed remain unfinished.

### The Hero

Khalimov was born in 1975 in Tajikistan’s Varzob district. During the country’s 1992-1997 civil war, he served in the rank-and-file of the local Special Purpose Mobile Unit (Otryad Mobil'nyy Osobogo Naznacheniya—OMON), and later enlisted in and successfully graduated from the Ministry of Internal Affairs Academy. A professional sniper, he took part in a series of anti-terrorism operations in the Rash Walley in 2009 and in Khorugh in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) in 2012. For that, he was decorated with numerous state medals and subsequently promoted to the rank of colonel ([Sputniknews.ru](http://Sputniknews.ru), September 8, 2017).

Being a military hero and a successful operative, Khalimov took part in various anti-

terrorist training camps/programs organized by the United States and Russia between 2003 and 2014. According to Khalimov, he was taught in U.S. training programs how to prevent terrorist attacks ([Stanradar.com](http://Stanradar.com), August 12). According to local sources, Tajikistan's military-political elites developed an early interest in Khalimov. Specifically, Major General Rustam Rahmon (the son of the Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon) considered the creation of a new government organization, to which he reportedly planned to assign Khalimov a special position ([Stanradar.com](http://Stanradar.com), May 29, 2015). However, as his career was taking off, Khalimov suddenly 'disappeared' in April 2015. His re-appearance shocked Tajikistan and its political leadership.

### **The Defector**

On May 28, 2015, Islamic State (IS) posted a video on YouTube in which Khalimov stated that he had joined the organization and called on Tajiks working in Russia to "stop being slaves" and "join jihad" against Russia, the United States, and Tajikistan's government. The video went viral ([Reuters.com](http://Reuters.com), May 28, 2015). Interestingly, prior to his escape, Khalimov had been detained by Tajikistani authorities on suspicion of contacts with radical Islamists. Yet, he escaped further prosecution and retained his position in the military, which seemed inexplicable at the time given the harsh measures applied by local authorities to those suspected of holding radical Islamist sympathies. Furthermore, it remains unclear how he (and his family) managed to freely leave the country undetected. Undoubtedly, this suggests the existence of multiple influential accomplices.

At this point it is still unclear what motivated Khalimov to take such a radical step. Local sources have come up with four potential

explanations. First, he may have joined IS as a protest against perceived injustices and maltreatment of Muslims, a sentiment that is allegedly widely endorsed by local authorities. Second, Khalimov's gradual religious transformation—he acknowledged that he began practicing Islam in 2001—and his transition toward radical Islamism might have led him to joining the terrorist group. However, according to Khalimov's co-workers and acquaintances, the colonel had never been thought of as an especially religious man. Third, he may have joined IS for financial gain. This is the least credible explanation given the benefits Khalimov and his second wife—who also worked in the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs)—were receiving in Tajikistan at the time of their departure and the young colonel's various career prospects. The fourth explanation is that Khalimov had some form of post-traumatic stress disorder—that his participation in multiple armed conflicts and military operations could have had a deep and profoundly disturbing psychological effect ([Sputniknews.ru](http://Sputniknews.ru), September 8, 2017).

### **The Radical**

Upon joining IS, Khalimov (al-Tajiki) experienced rapid career growth: in 2016, he became the organization's war minister, a position previously occupied by Tarkhan Batirashvili (a.k.a. Omar al-Shishani), who was killed near al-Shirqat, in Iraq. This made Khalimov the *de facto* second-in-command to IS Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Some sources have argued that this rapid rise within IS was not only a result of Khalimov's skills and expertise, but also because of his ethnic background and ties to Tajikistan, where IS had hoped to recruit more jihadists ([Sputniknews.ru](http://Sputniknews.ru), September 8, 2017). In effect, this thesis finds corroboration in Khalimov's future activities. Namely, Tajikistani sources claimed that local

servicemen started receiving text messages from the renegade colonel, with promises to “congratulate Tajikistan on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence [on September 9]” ([Centralasia.media](http://Centralasia.media), September 7, 2016).

Sources within Tajikistan’s security services later claimed that Khalimov had been spotted in the Afghan region of Badakhshan (approximately 80 kilometers from Tajikistan) in 2017. Khalimov, accompanied by some militants and fifteen members of the Tajik “Alfa” special forces who also allegedly defected, reportedly attempted to enter Tajikistan in order to stir the situation in Tajikistani Badakhshan, where anti-Rahmon feelings had been on the rise for some time, and potentially recruit new militants ([Fergana.media](http://Fergana.media), January 11, 2019).

In effect, rumors about Khalimov were running rampant when he was, once again, pronounced dead. However, this declaration might be premature, given the lack of factual evidence. According to Afghan intelligence services, Khalimov may still be alive and hiding in Central Asia or northern Afghanistan ([Dw.com](http://Dw.com), August 6).

### **Conclusion: The Legacy of the Rebellious Colonel**

The actual fate of Khalimov—whether he was killed or went into hiding—is a secondary concern. Far more important is the impact the ‘Khalimov affair’ might have on Tajikistan and the regional and global extremist movement. In this regard, four points should be highlighted.

First, Tajikistan seems to have failed to resolve its most burning religious questions. The policy chosen by Rahmon after 1997 puts Islam in an ambiguous position. This policy, which infuriates many religious Tajikistanis, has reached its limits and is in

need of reform ([Berlek-nkp.com](http://Berlek-nkp.com), June 1, 2015). It is doubtful that the current political leadership is capable of creating a new approach.

Second, Tajikistan may be looking into the “diversification of radicalism” phenomenon. Radical Islamist ideas are gaining popularity among labor migrants, marginalized members of Tajikistani society and military members like Khalimov. As Central Asian experts have noted, this could open up a Pandora’s Box, with radicalism finding a safe haven among local military/police in the region ([Hronikatm.com](http://Hronikatm.com), June 6, 2015). One such expert, Andrey Serenko, noted: “[T]his is a signal for radical youth and even members of security services in Tajikistan and other Central Asian republics...to accept [Islamic State] and [be] given an opportunity to build a career” ([Centre1.com](http://Centre1.com), September 22, 2016).

Third, ethnic Tajiks—and Central Asians in general—might actually be forming the vanguard of regional radical fundamentalism. In effect, Khalimov may be viewed not simply as a unique case, but as an integral part of a larger trend. In effect, recent years have demonstrated the role of ethnic Tajiks in regional/global terrorist movements. It is worth remembering that Khalimov was not the only high-ranking Tajik in IS: in August 2014, another Tajik was promoted to the position of leading the strategic Raqqa province.

Finally, growing radicalization in northern Afghanistan and adjacent parts of Tajikistan might result in spreading destabilization to other parts of Central Asia through, among other measures, the revival of the “Great Khurasan” and other similar projects ([Cezarium.com](http://Cezarium.com), July 27, 2016).



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## **AQIM’s Mauritanian Jihadist-Theologian in the Sahel— Abdullah al-Shinqiti**

*Jacob Zenn*

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has historically been an Algeria-based and Algerian-led jihadist group. Nevertheless, AQIM has empowered, in particular, Malians by allowing them to lead AQIM’s Mali-based sub-affiliate, Group of Supporters of Islam and Muslims (Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin—JNIM). In addition, although AQIM’s *shura* (consultative council) has principally consisted of only Algerians, AQIM did elevate Mauritians to Sahel-based AQIM leadership positions. One such Mauritanian promoted by AQIM in the Sahel at a young age was Mohamed Lemine al-Hacene al-Hadrami (a.k.a. Abdullah al-Shinqiti).

Al-Shinqiti first gained prominence in 2012, when he became the first non-Algerian to lead an AQIM brigade ([Sahara Media](#), September 27, 2012). This occurred when al-Shinqiti took over AQIM’s al-Furqan brigade, which had previously been led by the Algerian Yahaya al-Hammam (Jemal Oukacha). However, al-Hammam was promoted to lead AQIM’s Sahara Region, which left open the al-Furqan brigade leadership position for al-Shinqiti.

The experience that al-Shinqiti brought to the table included his being the spokesman of AQIM’s Sahara Region prior to his promotion. He was skilled in communicating with recruits and the mainstream press, making attack claims and various statements. The Sahara Region was also known as AQIM’s ‘sixth zone’ and included parts of northern Mali. Prior to all this, al-Shinqiti, who was born in 1981 in Mauritania’s capital Nouakchott to a family originally from Trarza, had already earned a reputation as a religious scholar. Trarza was a hotbed of Salafist

radicalism in Mauritania in the 1980s and a recruiting epicenter for AQIM, which may also have influenced al-Shinqiti's early trajectory.

The key turning point for al-Shinqiti was when he enrolled in the Advanced Institute for Islamic Studies and Research (ISERI), which was among the institutes in Mauritania that had taught Saudi-style Salafism since the 1970s ([Al Jazeera](#), July 27, 2012). However, in 2003, Mauritania's then-president Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya blamed Islamists for an attempted coup, despite the fact that their involvement was peripheral. This led to a crackdown on Islamists that continued until a year after Ould Taya himself was overthrown in a coup in 2005. As a result, the government imprisoned numerous young Islamists, including al-Shinqiti. He wrote his thesis during his 16 months of imprisonment in 2005-2006 ([Sahara Media](#), September 27, 2012).

Al-Shinqiti seems to have transformed from an Islamic student into a jihadist while in prison. After his release, he was not seen again until he emerged as an AQIM spokesman. In particular, he was known for appealing to other young Mauritanian AQIM recruits and preaching with other well-educated young Mauritanian theologians, including Ibrahim Ould Hamoud (Abu Darda al-Shinqiti), at least until Hamoud's arrest in Algeria in 2019 ([abamako.com](#), February 12, 2019).

### **Abdullah al-Shinqiti in AQIM Videos and Messages**

If AQIM videos are any indication, Abdullah al-Shinqiti was not only a preacher, but also a source of moral support for the organization's members. For example, in the second part of AQIM's August 2011 video "Assault Them at the Gate," al-Shinqiti was seen praying over a slain Mauritanian "martyr" who had just died in battle and even appeared to smile in death during al-Shinqiti's prayers ([Al-Andalus](#), August

3, 2011). Despite al-Shinqiti's prominent role in AQIM and position as spokesman, he rarely appeared in videos.

Perhaps the only other video in which al-Shinqiti appeared was AQIM's video called "Fighting Is Prescribed for You," which came out in August 2010, one year before the "Assault Them at the Gate" video. In this video, al-Shinqiti appeared along with other prominent Mauritanian and Malian AQIM commanders, including Hamadou Kheiry and Oumar Ould Hamaha, and Fulani, Nigerian, and Guinean fighters, all of whom delivered lectures. Al-Shinqiti's lecture had distinctly global and sub-Saharan African themes, including when he called for jihad and asked the audience of fighters: "Don't you see what happens to our brothers in Palestine, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Sudan?" ([al-Andalus](#), August 1, 2010).

Al-Shinqiti appears to have followed through with his engagement of sub-Saharan African jihadists. In October 2011, Nigerian jihadists in Boko Haram, including several who had significant training and combat experience with AQIM, wrote a letter to Abdullah al-Shinqiti to explain how Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau was engaging in "deviance and excesses." They sought to separate from Shekau, but sought AQIM's permission to do so.

Since al-Shinqiti had prior experience among Nigerian jihadists, he was the recipient of their letter. Moreover, al-Shinqiti's high-level position in AQIM meant he could pass on the letter to other influential AQIM members, including Mokhtar Belmokhtar, to whom the Nigerian jihadists wanted the letter forwarded, and another prominent Mauritanian AQIM theologian and mediator, Abu Numan Qutayba al-Shinqiti (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), May 5). Eventually, the letter was also passed to two leading Algerian AQIM theologians, Abderrahmane Abou Ishak Essoufi and Abu al-Hassan Rashid al-Bulaydi, who approved the

Nigerian jihadists' separation from Shekau. This separation happened in January 2012 and led to the formation of the Boko Haram breakaway faction, Jamaat Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan (Group of Muslim Supporters in Black Africa), or "Ansaru" ([al-Andalus, April 2017](#)).

### **Operating from Behind the Scenes**

Ansaru became the al-Qaeda-loyal faction in Nigeria, but it was still far less influential than either the Shekau-led Boko Haram or Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), which was formed in March 2015. Meanwhile, in Mali and neighboring parts of Niger and Mali, AQIM supported the 2017 formation of JNIM, whose leadership featured Malians in much more prominent positions than Mauritians. This was partly because Mauritanian theologians like al-Shinqiti tended to remain in AQIM, whereas JNIM recruited Malians, Nigeriens, and Burkinabes and also fielded extra-regional fighters from as far away as Saudi Arabia ([Jana-ly, March 11](#)).

Nevertheless, Mauritanian theologians like Abu Numan Qutayba al-Shinqiti still advised JNIM. In January 2020, for example, he drafted two treatises calling for jihadist unity and the gradual implementation of sharia. These treatises were intended to address JNIM's growing conflict with Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) ([al-Zallaqa, January](#); [al-Zallaqa, February](#)). However, all-out ISGS-JNIM clashes continued.

Amid these developments involving ISGS and JNIM and the latter's increasing activity in the Sahel, Abdullah al-Shinqiti initially kept a low profile and was rarely seen in AQIM videos or statements. This was likely because AQIM's Sahara Region, including the al-Furqan brigade, was subsumed into JNIM and al-Shinqiti did not retain his brigade leadership or spokesman positions in the reorganization. Rather, Yahya Abu al-Hammam represented what had been

AQIM's Sahara Region within JNIM's formation and the Saudi Abu Dujana al-Qasimi, who had once been in Belmokhtar's brigade, assumed the spokesman position in JNIM ([Mali Canal, March 8, 2019](#)).

Still, in August 2020, Abdullah al-Shinqiti issued his first statement after a long period of silence. In it, al-Shinqiti criticized France for engaging in conspiratorial plots in Mauritania, disrespecting Muslims in the Sahel and North Africa, and operating as a master over African Muslims ([Site Intel Group, August 12](#)). This indicated that al-Shinqiti had shifted his attention toward his native country, Mauritania, perhaps because he did not join JNIM, and JNIM itself was responsible for disseminating messages about Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and the Sahel, but not necessarily Mauritania. In contrast, AQIM's narratives remained more oriented toward Algeria and Mauritania.

Al-Shinqiti, in his August 2020 statement, seemed to recall his own experience at ISERI, which was closed down before his imprisonment in 2005: he criticized Mauritania's more recent closure of another Islamic university and center in Mauritania ([Al Araby, November 21, 2018](#)). He further accused Mauritania's government of serving 'Crusaders' and disrespecting Islam, while also calling on Mauritanian Muslims to defend their honor and embrace jihad. Although AQIM has not conducted any attacks in Mauritania in nearly a decade, by mid-2020, JNIM had begun operating near the Mauritania-Mali border. Thus, al-Shinqiti's threats could be viewed as sending a message to Mauritania to stop collaborating with France, cracking down on Islamists, and arresting jihadists, or risk suffering a JNIM attack.

## **Contextualizing Abdullah al-Shinqiti's Career**

Abdullah al-Shinqiti's career reflects AQIM's broader trajectory. He began as an educated Islamic student in Mauritania, was pressured by his native government and imprisoned, was radicalized, and then joined AQIM. He viewed AQIM as his best option to seek revenge against the Mauritanian government. However, by the late 2000s, AQIM was already beginning to expand into Sahelian countries, as far away as Nigeria, and al-Shinqiti became involved in these efforts. In particular, he was the point-person between AQIM and Boko Haram for a period in 2011 and delivered lectures to other sub-Saharan African fighters, as seen in AQIM videos.

Like other Mauritanian AQIM theologians, al-Shinqiti neither fit in completely with AQIM's Algerian-centric leadership nor JNIM's Malian focus. He nevertheless ended up remaining in AQIM, but was rarely seen in any videos or statements after JNIM's formation. This is despite having held a prominent position in AQIM's Sahelian operations before JNIM's formation. Al-Shinqiti's reemergence in August 2020 as an AQIM theologian, with a focus not only on Mauritania, but also the Sahel and Africa more broadly, reflects al-Shinqiti's long-term embeddedness in AQIM and the breadth of his narratives and regional experience.

Ultimately, although Mauritania and AQIM have seemingly engaged in detente, there is no guarantee they will not clash again. AQIM, or JNIM specifically, has continuously spread its areas of operations since its formation and is already conducting attacks near Mauritania's borders. Should JNIM engage in attacks within Mauritania itself, one can expect AQIM theologians from Mauritania, especially Abdullah al-Shinqiti, to explain, to the world and other jihadists, al-Qaeda's demands on

Mauritania and the organization's reasons for attacking the country.

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## Abu al-Yaqzan al-Masri: The Egyptian Salafist Refusing to Back Turkey or HTS in Syria

*Rami Jameel*

Abu al-Yaqzan al-Masri is one of the most active jihadist scholars in Syria. Until last year, he was a senior member of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), led by Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the leader of al-Nusra Front. Al-Masri became the *Shara'è* (religious guide) of the military wing of HTS when he joined the group upon its formation in 2017. As a result of the group deciding to go in a more moderate and Syrian-focused direction, he resigned in February 2019 ([Almodon](#), February 2, 2019).

In the two years prior to his resignation, al-Masri played a key role in HTS' fights with other Syrian opposition groups, especially Ahrar al-Sham, another rebel organization that he himself was once a senior member of and later abandoned ([Aman Dostor](#), July 19, 2018). Unlike most of the HTS senior members who split from or were expelled by the group after it adopted its new strategy, al-Masri did not join another organization.

Al-Masri is now independent, and still lives in the area controlled by HTS in the Idlib province of northwestern Syria. His resignation was an early indication of the seriousness of HTS' decision to abandon global jihad in favor of focusing completely on its role and position in the future of Syria. [1] Likewise, his next move or HTS' next action against him will likely provide an indication on the situation in the opposition-controlled northwestern part of Syria.

### The Egyptian Teacher

Al-Masri's real name is Muhammad Naji. He was born in Alexandria, Egypt, 48 years ago, in 1972. Al-Masri (which means 'the Egyptian' in Arabic) received both an official education and religious training. He served as a high school teacher for 19 years in Egypt, during which time he ascended within local Salafist circles. However, he never claimed to be a member of any of the prominent Egyptian Salafist-jihadists groups that clashed with the Egyptian government during the 1980s and 1990s. He even denies reports that he was a member of al-Noor party, which emerged as the main Salafist political faction in post-Hosni Mubarak Egypt ([YouTube](#), February 19, 2019).

Al-Masri came to Syria in 2013 and resided in the country's then largest city, Aleppo. He claimed that he sympathized with the Syrian people who were suffering at the hands of the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Although al-Masri does not cite problems in his home country as a reason for his immigration to Syria, it was in 2013 that the Egyptian military took over the government in Cairo and toppled President Mohammed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood member who was elected the previous year. The new government of President Abdul-Fattah el-Sisi banned and persecuted members of the Muslim Brotherhood, but received the support of al-Noor party Salafists. However, life became harder for Egyptian Islamists in general under el-Sisi.

An alternative narrative is worth considering, although it has not been confirmed. Several reports—especially pushed in the Turkish media—accuse al-Masri of being an agent of the Middle Eastern governments of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Those countries allegedly have an agenda to sabotage the Syrian opposition from within and counter the influence of their rivals Turkey and Qatar ([Syria Noor](#), January 23, 2019). Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar's regional rivalry

extends to Syria, with these countries having provided essential support to different Syrian opposition groups since 2011. [2]

At any rate, when al-Masri settled in Aleppo, his first destination in Syria, he almost instantly became an influential member of Ahrar al-Sham at the height of its power as one of the largest opposition groups in the country. He saw Ahrar as an open-minded group that despite the Muslim Brotherhood roots of its founding leaders, was open to other Islamist schools of thought, like his own Salafism ([YouTube](#), February 19, 2019).

### **The Fall of Aleppo**

The fall of Aleppo to the Assad government in the second half of 2016 was probably the biggest blow the armed opposition suffered in the course of the Syrian civil war. The development was especially consequential for Ahrar. It was one of the largest groups in the city. Al-Julani's al-Nusra Front had already declared that it was no longer al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, and made another significant move to bolster that claim by establishing HTS. Al-Masri joined the group and embraced its policies. By that time, he had already left Ahrar, angry with its religious leaders' decision to support Turkey's invasion of northern Syria and its clashes with Islamic State (IS) and the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Al-Masri was not a supporter of IS—a group he labeled as *Khawarij* (misguided and condemned Muslim rebels)—and he was not a sympathizer of the SDF, but he was against taking part in a campaign that he believed was in the national interests of Turkey, and not necessarily that of Islam ([Enabbaladi](#), July 30, 2017).

### **The Shoot-to-Kill Fatwa**

HTS' initial approach to handling Ahrar was to first attempt to contain the group and include its

members within the organization's new tent. After a few months, however, it was clear that approach led to a breakdown of Ahrar, with various leaders and fighters splitting away, but not to its complete dissolution. The HTS then changed its approach dramatically, fighting Ahrar in order to extend its military domination of opposition-controlled areas in northern Syria. Al-Masri was probably the most forthcoming leader in pursuing that policy. His fatwa to HTS fighters to not hesitate to 'shoot-to-kill' when fighting the group he was formerly a member of stirred major controversy ([Arabi21](#), July 22, 2017).

Using military tactics proved to be effective in achieving HTS' goal of establishing control over other opposition groups, but it also attracted criticism that the organization was too harsh on fellow Muslim opposition members ([Akhbaralaan](#), July 12, 2018).

In his defense of his fatwa, al-Masri claimed that his words were taken out of context and that his ruling was restricted to one particular incident. He even rejected the notion that it was a fatwa, and instead insisted that it was merely a one-off call to settle a certain challenging battleground situation. The effect of HTS' hardline military tactics was clear, however, and the group succeeded in fulfilling its goal of being the dominant power in opposition-held northwestern Syria ([Enabbaladi](#), February 20, 2019; [YouTube](#), February 19, 2019).

In response to new developments in the Syrian conflicts—namely, the Russian-Turkish-Iranian agreements—al-Julani adopted a new strategy. HTS started to present itself as a moderate group that had an agenda dedicated solely to Syria and abandoning global jihad completely. Its break with al-Qaeda became more credible as the global jihadist group endorsed Huras al-Deen (HAD) as its new branch in Syria. One of the early moves that signaled al-Julani's new

strategy was HTS' issuance of new orders in the areas it controlled that restricted the freedom of scholars to issue fatwas on public and specifically political affairs. Al-Masri saw his place within HTS growing complicated ([Alsouria](#), February 2, 2019).

HTS' new strategy was essentially based on cooperating with Turkish efforts in Syria. This is the policy that drove al-Masri away from Ahrar and other groups to HTS in the first place. The last straw for HTS was when he did not commit to obeying the new rules that restricted the issuing of religious rulings and political statements. That led to his resignation, which was reportedly ordered by al-Julani himself following complaints filed by HTS leadership against al-Masri concerning his lack of commitment to the new rules ([Alaraby.co.uk](#), February 3, 2019). Al-Masri claims that he resigned willingly over issues that he does not want to make public ([Arabi21](#), February 3, 2019).

### **Coronavirus Crisis**

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit the opposition-held areas in Syria, al-Masri took a position that openly and vehemently opposed the HTS-supported local administration in Idlib. He rejected the administration's decision to stop public prayers at mosques and claimed that religious gatherings should continue despite the pandemic ([Shaam](#), April 3).

Although he changed his position gradually and showed more understanding to the seriousness of the coronavirus crisis, his initial reaction represented a problem for the administration that HTS was working hard to show as a model of governance in the area. The local administration is a government controlled by HTS, but is headed and run by civilian local technocrats who wear Western suits and apply relatively modern administrative policies.

### **Conclusion**

Al-Masri played a significant role in the ascendancy of HTS as the dominant power in opposition-held northwestern Syria. Even the accusation that he is an agent of anti-Turkish countries in the Middle East did not change the fact that he remained an influential figure when he was with Ahrar and more so after he joined HTS.

It is not easy to find signs of al-Masri's potential affiliation as he now avoids giving opinions on issues outside Syria. He has been clear in his opposition to military cooperation with Turkey, which was the issue that led to his departure from both Ahrar and the HTS. Al-Masri justified that opinion by arguing that Turkey is a secular state that fights for its national interests, and not necessarily in the interests of Islam. He still expressed symbolic support for Turkish campaigns against the PKK and YPG Kurds because of the latter's alliance with the United States and the West, and its Marxist-rooted ideology. When the recent conflict in Karabakh broke out between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces in the South Caucasus, he issued a fatwa against Syrian fighters going to fight on the side of the Azerbaijani Muslims, labelling them as mercenaries. He saw Syria as a priority for fighting jihad, especially for Syrians ([YouTube](#), September 28).

As HTS moved to become a moderate Syrian Islamist group, al-Masri ceased being the valuable asset he once was for al-Julani. Neither his Salafist ideology nor his Egyptian citizenship are helpful to HTS. The group might, in time come to blame him and other field leaders for the harsh battle tactics used against Ahrar and other opposition groups. Such a pragmatic move might appeal to Syrians outside the base of HTS.

Al-Masri is still living in HTS-held areas and he is active in communicating with the community. He still makes Friday speeches and issues religious rulings and makes statements on current affairs and public issues. It is clear that the HTS has given him a margin of freedom that it did not give to other figures who left the group. On his part, he has not yet publicly criticized any of al-Julani's strategic decisions. Al-Julani's transformation of HTS is not yet finished, and the success of the new strategy will depend heavily on the acceptance of regional powers, particularly Turkey. If that does not happen, al-Masri will again be needed to confront a potentially new chapter in the Syrian conflict, that could see conflict occur between HTS and Turkish-backed Syrian groups. The future choices of this prolific preacher and HTS' degree of tolerance of him will indicate new developments in the opposition group's policies.

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## Notes

[1] For more details on the HTS's new strategy see [Terrorism Monitor](#), October 13.

[2] That theory suggests that al-Masri works for the governments of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which are in the middle of a significant regional struggle with Turkey and Qatar. The Egyptian government of President Abdul-Fatah el-Sisi is part of the Saudi-UAE alliance since Turkey and Qatar supported the Muslim Brotherhood and condemned the toppling of Morsi. Saudi Arabia has historically maintained significant influence on traditional Salafists and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has spearheaded an anti-political Islam agenda in the Middle East. The struggle between the Saudi Arabia-UAE-Egypt alliance and the Turkey-Qatar axis—which supports

Islamist political movements as a genuine part of the political spectrum in the Middle East, especially when elected—is the most important dynamic in regional policy in recent years.

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