



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

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Radullan Sahiron—Is the Abu Sayyaf Leader Partnering with Islamic State in the Philippines?

John Foulkes

On November 22, four members of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) surrendered to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in Patikul, Sulu province. One of the four was revealed to be the grandson of Radullan Sahiron, a leader of ASG and a multi-decade veteran of the Philippines’ insurgencies ([Manila Bulletin](#), November 22). Sahiron is one of the most senior and highly respected of ASG’s factional leaders. He is also a prominent leader of the organization who has not pledged *bay’ah* (allegiance) to Islamic State. However, recent activity suggests that he is growing closer to that international organization, with worrying repercussions for the Philippines.

Sahiron is an ethnic Moro and is believed to have been born in either 1952 or 1955 in Kabbun Takas, Patikul, Sulu. He reportedly lost his right arm above the elbow while fighting the AFP in the 1970s, earning the nickname ‘Commander *Putol*’ (meaning ‘cut off’ in Filipino) ([FBI.gov](#), February 27, 2007). Sahiron was

originally associated with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), but left the group in 1992 to join Abu Sayyaf alongside other extremists who were disillusioned with that organization’s compromises with the Manila government. When Sahiron made the move to ASG, he had under his command a fighter named Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan. Sawadjaan is today the *de facto* leader of Islamic State’s regional affiliate, Islamic State East Asia province (ISEA) ([Sunstar](#), February 22, 2019).

Sahiron has been a part of the ASG leadership for several decades, having reportedly joined the organization’s 14-member leadership council, the *majlis shura*, in 1999. In mid-2002, he acted as a close advisor to ASG leader Khadafi Abubakar Janjalani, who took over the position following the December 1998 death of his brother and ASG founder Abubakar Abubakar Janjalani.

From 2000 to 2003 he led a sub-group of the organization, ASG-Putol, which consisted of about a hundred fighters, before further climbing the ranks of the organization to become the overall commander of the group’s forces on Jolo Island, Sulu province. At this point, Sahiron reportedly commanded approximately a

thousand fighters. After Khadafi Abubakar Janjalani's death in September 2006, Sahiron emerged as one of the group's senior leaders, alongside Yasir Igasan and Isnilon Hapilon ([UNSC](#), April 17, 2018).

Sahiron has been on the FBI's most wanted list since 1993, when he was involved in the kidnapping of a U.S. citizen ([FBI.gov](#), February 27, 2007). Sahiron was designated as a terrorist by the U.S. Treasury Department in November 2005. The department cited his involvement as a key leader in multiple kidnapping-for-ransom operations. The largest such operation he oversaw was the April 2000 kidnapping of 21 tourists, including Westerners, Malaysians, and Filipinos. By December 2003, Sahiron likely raised more than \$636,000 from several kidnapping-for-ransom operations.

The ASG leader is also responsible for coordinating a series of bombing attacks that killed 11 people and wounded 200 others in October 2002. The bombs used in the attack reportedly were assembled in his headquarters ([Treasury.gov](#), November 30, 2005).

Since these exploits in the early 2000s and his rise to further leadership in 2006, Sahiron has continued to use Jolo Island, specifically the mountainous town of Patikul, as a base of operations. He has taken part in multiple gunfights with the AFP, who have relentlessly targeted him. In April 2015, the AFP engaged in a two hour firefight with forces led by Sahiron ([Rappler](#), April 9, 2015). He was reportedly injured engaging soldiers associated with the AFP's Joint Task Force Sulu in March 2016 ([The Philippine Star](#), March 19, 2016).

Sahiron has historically not associated with foreign fighters and has not pledged loyalty to Islamic State ([Asia Sentinel](#), April 24). That Sahiron would not allow foreign fighters in his group—believing them to be “magnets for military airstrikes”—led current IS-EA leader

Sawadjaan to leave his command ([Sunstar](#), February 22, 2019). Sahiron's aversion to following Islamic State, and instead focusing on conducting criminal activities, led to a splintering within the larger ASG organization in 2014, as Islamic State-aligned ASG leaders, such as the now-dead Isnilon Hapilon and Sawadjaan, pushed for more terrorist attacks.

Recent events, however, seem to indicate that he has changed policies, or at least made a temporary marriage of convenience with the ASG faction affiliated with Sawadjaan's IS-EA. Analysts have speculated that increased operations by the AFP in Patikul have pushed Sahiron's faction and IS-EA together. Sahiron and Sawadjaan jointly commanded an ambush of AFP soldiers on April 17, which involved approximately 40 IS-EA/ASG fighters, and killed 12 Filipino soldiers, wounding 13 ([Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines Report](#), June 30, 2020).

A day after the ambush, AFP soldiers killed Vikram Sahiron, Radullan's grandson. Vikram Sahiron was a bomb-maker who was reportedly involved in both the April 17 ambush and the January 19, 2019 Jolo Cathedral bombing ([Rappler](#), April 19). Sawadjaan was allegedly the “mastermind and financier” of the cathedral bombing, which killed 23 and wounded over 100 others ([Rappler](#), July 24, 2019).

On November 3, 2020, the Joint Task Force Sulu intercepted an ASG speedboat that, according to the AFP, was planning to conduct kidnapping-for-ransom activities. The seven militants onboard the speedboat were killed in the encounter with the Filipino military. Two of the dead were nephews of Sawadjaan, and the AFP's Western Mindanao Command said that the operation they were conducting was being overseen by both Sawadjaan and Sahiron ([CNN Philippines](#), November 3).

Sahiron has seemingly avoided closer ties to Islamic State's affiliates in the Philippines since the first ASG factions made their oaths to former Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014 due to an aversion to hosting foreign fighters and a predilection toward focusing on criminal activities and minimizing risks. Sawadjaan, meanwhile, has introduced foreign fighters—something Sahiron has opposed—and suicide bombing tactics to the insurgency in Sulu.

Increasing pressure from the AFP is pushing Sahiron closer to Sawadjaan's IS-EA, as indicated by their recent collaborations. ASG factions are organized within familial and clan-based cells, so the fact that family members of both leaders have reportedly worked for the other side is indicative of a growing integration between the factions. Should the two formally combine their forces, it would change the dynamic of the insurgency for the worst, augmenting the number of fighters the insurgency is able to place in the field while potentially simplifying their chain-of-command. Furthermore, it could act as a beacon to other extremists in the Philippines and the wider region, especially should Sahiron acquiesce to Sawadjaan's policy of allowing foreign fighters to join the group. Differences in policies, leadership styles, and the continued domination of familial-based faction within ASG are likely to keep these leaders and their followers from fully integrating their operations, but their cooperation will, at the very least, hurt the AFP's mission of stabilizing this volatile province.

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Shaykh Abukar Ali Adan: The Making of a New al-Shabaab Leader

Sunguta West

Shaykh Abukar Ali Adan—a hardliner within al-Shabaab, the Somali-based Islamist militant group—is believed to have risen to the organization's top leadership position, after the current emir transferred power to the organization's former military leader.

In August this year, reports emerged that Shaykh Ahmed Diriye a.k.a. Abu Ubaidah had reassigned power to Adan. Abu Ubaidah relinquished the position in order to battle kidney failure. The move, which promoted one of his deputies above other contenders, was seen as further widening existing internal disagreements, causing a split within the al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa ([The Standard](#), August 31).

The exact timing of the actual transfer of power is unclear, but the change had been widely anticipated following earlier reports that the supreme leader was ailing and unable to discharge his duties efficiently. The decision also came amid reports that the militant group's top leadership had been wrangling over who would take over following the demise of Abu Ubaidah.

According to Somalia's intelligence agency, the National Intelligence Security Agency (NISA), Adan is currently supervising and running the group's activities, including suicide and IED bombings, illegal taxation and assassinations ([Garowe online](#), August 28).

Who is Shaykh Abukar Ali Adan?

Adan (a.k.a. Shaykh Abukar Ali Aden, a.k.a. Shaykh Abukar, a.k.a. Ibrahim Afghan) is an al-Shabaab militant leader, who served as a deputy

to the emir. Although information about him is scant, he is believed to be a hardliner who is on good terms with the current supreme leader. He was also loyal to Abu Ubaidah's predecessor, Shaykh Ahmed Abdi Godane, a brutal hardliner and strategist who led al-Shabaab's evolution from a local Somali terrorist group to a regional organization. Godane was killed in a U.S. airstrike in 2014.

Adan's exact date of birth is unknown, but reports suggest he was born between 1971 and 1973 in Hiiraan in Central Somalia.

In 2018, he became one of the new faces at the top of al-Shabaab's leadership after Abu Ubaidah appointed him as either his deputy or a principal advisor. He had spent several years as al-Shabaab's military chief, previously heading the *Jabhat*, al-Shabaab's army. He is believed to have become the head of the group's military sometime in 2015.

During Adan's tenure as military chief, al-Shabaab carried out some of its deadliest attacks, targeting remote bases set-up by African militaries or the Somali National Army. The first attack was on a base in Leebo occupied by Burundian soldiers who were part of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) deployment. At least 50 Burundian soldiers were killed in the June 2015 attack ([Radio Dalsan](#), June 27, 2015).

Under his watch, al-Shabaab planned and executed the al-Adde attack during which several Kenyan soldiers were killed. Although Kenya has never released the exact number of the dead soldiers, al-Shabaab released a video showing the extent of the damage, with some news reports indicating at least 147 soldiers were killed. The attack boosted the morale of al-Shabaab fighters and raised Adan's credentials as the head of the group's military ([The Star](#), January 24).

Analysts say Adan changed how al-Shabaab approached fighting. In various attacks, the group began sending a team of fighters to engage the enemy instead of only deploying a few suicide bombers to attack a target.

Adan's history with the militant group can be traced back to 2000, when, as a young businessman, he provided financial support to the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a loose Islamic group in Somalia that preceded al-Shabaab. The courts had stepped in to provide leadership, law enforcement and security in the failed state through the establishment of *Sharia* Courts. Through these courts, Adan became involved with al-Shabaab.

In 2018, his jihadist credentials gained an additional boost after the U.S State Department designated him as a terrorist. He was designated alongside other militant leaders from al-Qaeda affiliates, including Muhammad al-Ghazali, a senior member of the al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Wanas al-Faqih, an associate of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), who planned the March 18, 2015 attack on the Bardo National Museum in the Tunisian capital, Tunis. The attack killed at least 20 people, including foreign tourists. In sanctioning the three, the United States declared that they had committed acts of terrorism ([GaroweOnline](#), August 28).

Although a 2016 report by the Mogadishu Center for Research and Studies indicated that Adan had died in a U.S. airstrike at a training camp in the Hiiraan Region of Central Somalia, subsequent reports indicated the militant leader was still alive. The U.S. drone attack near Buloburte allegedly killed 150 militants, including Adan and other top al-Shabaab militants. The report described him as the group's head of defense ([Mogadishu Center for Research and Studies](#), March 9, 2016).

Media reports indicate that Adan became the governor of Somalia's Lower and Middle Juba region in 2009. The region includes the strategic port city of Kismayo, where he served as the local al-Shabaab leader in charge of economic and military operations. The influential position prepared Adan and gave him the experience he needed to rise to the top of al-Shabaab's leadership.

In 2011, he was quoted as providing an account of the first airstrike to hit Kismayo, saying the bombing had been carried out by Kenyan aircraft. Kenya entered Somalia to fight al-Shabaab in October 2011, accusing the militant group of kidnapping and killing local and international aid workers, tourists and Kenyan nationals ([Daily Monitor](#), October 25, 2011).

In 2010, while in Kismayo, he was quoted commenting on the killing of Shaykh Daud Ali Hassan, an al-Shabaab military commander operating along the Kenya border. Reports said Hassan had been killed by unknown gunmen. Adan said they arrested some suspects in connection with the murder ([Capital FM](#), March 21, 2010).

Adan currently appears set to lead the Somali-based militant group. He will inherit a divided organization and face internal resistance from some of the group's commanders, who allegedly oppose his rise.

By appointing Adan, Ubaidah could be acting to save the 14-year-old organization. The new leader is likely to face stiff opposition from other key leaders, such as Mohammed Warsame, a.k.a. Mahad Karate, who, like Adan, is on the U.S. list of wanted terrorists.

Karate used his position as head of al-Shabaab's powerful departments of intelligence and finance to frustrate Abu Ubaidah's leadership. Earlier this year, Karate allegedly attempted to forcefully

take over al-Shabaab's leadership ([The Standard](#), August 31).

Karate reportedly refused to give Abu Ubaidah access the group's finances, crippling his ability to pay his fighters. In retaliation, the emir started purging Karate supporters, the majority of whom are from his Habagedir-ayr clan. In counter-retaliation, Karate also targeted Ubaidah's stronghold, striking his kinsmen from the Rahawein clan, the source of his support. Adan is from the Gaalje'el, a Somali clan inhabiting the Hiiraan, Lower and Middle Shabelle, and Jubaland regions.

Attempts by Ubaidah to expel Karate from al-Shabaab's leadership early this year reportedly failed after Karate's clan threatened to launch a parallel al-Shabaab wing. The clan elders had accused Ubaidah of arrogance and demanded that he cede power to the younger generation ([Garowe Online](#), August 29).

Adan will inherit a militant group that is split not only over its leadership, but over the choice of international terrorist group to which it should pledge allegiance. Some al-Shabaab leaders insist it should stick with al-Qaeda, while others suggest it's the time to shift to IS ([The Standard](#), August 31).

However, judging from Adan's experience—first with Godane and then with Abu Ubaidah—it is evident that he is up to the task. Al-Shabaab seems in need of leadership, given that the ailing Abu Ubaidah has been unable to provide top-level direction and strategy. Moreover, Adan is relatively young at 47 and could inject new energy into the deadly organization.

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Mawlawi Abdul Hakim— Taliban’s Negotiator-in-Chief at the Intra-Afghan Talks

Sudha Ramachandran

On September 5, the Taliban announced its 21-member team that would engage in negotiations with Afghan government representatives at Doha, Qatar. The Taliban’s “Chief Justice,” Mawlawi Abdul Hakim, an “ultraconservative” and “hardline cleric,” was appointed chief of the negotiating team. He replaced Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai who, along with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, had led the Taliban negotiations with the United States that culminated in the February 29 Doha Agreement. Stanikzai was appointed Hakim’s deputy ([TOLO News](#), September 6; [RFERL](#), September 10).

The new appointments to the Taliban negotiating team are significant. This is the first time that the Taliban is engaging in direct and official talks with the Afghan government. Since it lost power in November 2001, the Taliban has been waging an armed insurgency. While its violent campaign has enabled it to wrest control over a growing expanse of territory, this has not brought it to national power. The Taliban is now using negotiations to do so. As chief negotiator, Hakim will lead the Taliban’s attempt to negotiate its ascent to power in Kabul and also to reform and perhaps even replace the current Afghan constitution.

Who is Hakim, and what benefits does the Taliban hope to derive from him heading the negotiating team at the historic intra-Afghan talks?

Experience in Islamic Jurisprudence

Born in 1957 in the Panjwai District of Afghanistan’s Kandahar province, Hakim is a member of the Ishaqzai tribe. He graduated

from and subsequently taught at the Darul Uloom Haqqania religious seminary in Pakistan’s Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. This seminary, which propagates teachings of the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam, is the alma mater of some of the most prominent South Asian jihadists, including the Taliban’s founder-chief Mullah Mohammed Omar. Hakim likely became acquainted with Omar at this seminary. According to the Taliban, Hakim was a “close associate” of Omar and “played a key role in founding the movement.” He went on to play an important role in the Taliban regime. Besides teaching at the Jihadi Madrassa in Kandahar during this period, he served in the Appellate Court and at the Dar ul-Ifta-ye Markazai [Central House/Department of Fatwa]” ([Voice of Jihad](#), September 30).

Since 2001, Hakim has played an important role in shaping the structures of the judicial system of the Taliban’s parallel government. He rose rapidly in the hierarchy, serving as head of the Mahkama-e Tamiz [Court of Cassation] when Akhundzada was the “chief justice.” In 2016, when Akhundzada became the Taliban chief, Hakim succeeded him as “Chief Justice” of the Taliban judicial system ([Voice of Jihad](#), September 30). He continues to hold the post of the Taliban’s “Chief Justice.”

Hakim’s knowledge of Sharia law and long experience in the Taliban judicial system is the “most important reason” for his appointment as chief negotiator in the talks with the Afghan government, according to an Afghan government official. The Afghan constitution, the nature of the Afghan state, sharia law and women’s rights under sharia law are the key issues on the Taliban agenda at the intra-Afghan talks. These are “Hakim’s areas of expertise.” Stanikzai lacks Hakim’s “vast knowledge and experience in Islamic jurisprudence” and his strength—i.e. his capacity to speak in English, which was needed during the talks with American officials—is not necessary for engaging

with Afghan officials now, the Afghan government official said. [1]

Stature and Support

According to Pakistani journalist and Taliban expert Tahir Khan, Hakim’s “religious and jihadi background” makes him “without doubt an asset for the Taliban.” His appointment as chief negotiator is aimed at reassuring Taliban commanders and foot-soldiers that the “negotiations are in safe hands.” [2] The move is also aimed at signaling to Taliban religious conservatives that “there will be no compromise on the group’s core Islamic values.” [3]

Hakim is respected for his judicial expertise as well. Akhundzada is known to have sought his opinion on key matters, including decisions to announce a week-long reduction in violence in the run-up to the February 29 Doha agreement and to participate in talks with the Afghan government. [4]

Hakim’s stature within the Taliban is also enhanced by the fact that he was part of Omar’s inner circle and has been with the group since its inception. [5] Like most of the older generation of Taliban leaders, he is a cleric from Kandahar and therefore represents the Taliban’s “core constituency.” Additionally, he enjoys the respect due to someone born in Pajwai district, regarded as the Taliban’s spiritual homeland ([TOLO News](#), September 6; [RFERL](#), September 10). The decisions of the negotiating team would therefore be more acceptable to Taliban military commanders and the rank-and-file.

Importantly, Hakim is a member of the *Rahbari Shura*, the Taliban’s Quetta-based leadership council. The appointment of a man of his seniority and stature as negotiator-in-chief to the intra-Afghan talks is seen as an indication that the Taliban is “very serious” about the talks ([Pajhwok](#), September 6).

Akhundzada’s Tightening Grip

In recent months, Akhundzada has been tightening his grip over the Taliban and the negotiation process through a string of appointments to powerful posts. In May, for instance, he replaced Ibrahim Sadr, the chief of the Taliban’s military commission, with Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob. Sadr’s opposition to talks with the Afghan government and to power sharing and compromise is said to have prompted Akhundzada’s decision. Yaqoob enjoys enormous prestige among the rank-and-file because of his lineage; he is Mullah Omar’s son. By appointing him as military commission chief, Akhundzada was no doubt seeking to draw on his influence to secure support for the ongoing talks and their outcome (see [MLM](#), September 3).

Similar motivations underlie Akhundzada’s appointment of Hakim as chief negotiator. Hakim’s commitment to the Taliban’s Islamic values is well known and his stewardship of the Taliban negotiating team is expected to strengthen support for any agreement reached at the negotiation table. Hakim is a close confidante of Akhundzada and the two share a similar “vision” for the Taliban and Afghanistan, which is evident from the fact that the Taliban chief often consults with him.

Akhundzada has also tightened his grip over the negotiations by appointing close aides and *Rahbari Shura* members—who are only accountable to the Taliban chief—to the negotiating team. Of the 21-member negotiating team, 13 are from the leadership council. Close aides of Akhundzada in the negotiating team include Sheikh Abdul Hakeem, Maulvi Abdul Kabeer, Maulvi Noor Mohammad Saqib, Mullah Shireen Noorzai, Sheikh Qasim Turkmen and Abdul Manan Omari ([Arab News](#), August 26).

The Taliban's talks with American officials were steered largely by its political office in Doha. The *Rahbari Shura* has reasserted direct control over the negotiations with the appointment of the new team. Unlike the negotiating team led by the Doha political office, which had to "get approval from the Shura for decisions" during their talks with the Americans, the Hakim-led, *Rahbari Shura*-dominated team "is not required to seek approval of its decisions" from the leadership. [6]

A Pragmatist

His conservative and hardline views on religion notwithstanding, Hakim has shown himself to be a pragmatic leader. During the three-day Eid ceasefire in June 2018, Afghan civilians, security forces and Taliban fighters were seen celebrating the short-lived return to peace. Hakim was swift in reading the writing on the wall.

In a letter to the *Rahbari Shura*, he welcomed the Taliban's decision to respond positively to the government ceasefire offer and urged the council to respond to the "legitimate demands" of the Afghan people for peace. He called on the Taliban to engage in "conditional or unconditional" peace talks. To turn down the requests of the Afghan *ulema* (Islamic scholars) and leaders of Islamic countries to engage in talks would cost the Taliban domestic and international financial and other support, he warned ([Ariana News](#), August 8, 2018).

Since the start of the peace talks, the Taliban has come under immense pressure from the Afghan government, the international community and Afghan civilians to declare a ceasefire. As the Taliban's chief negotiator, will Hakim steer the group toward announcing a ceasefire? He is unlikely to. Deep divisions exist within the Taliban over the ongoing talks with the Afghan government. Hakim will avoid taking the anti-talk hardliners head-on by calling for a ceasefire. His pragmatism will prompt him to be cautious.

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Notes

[1] Author's Interview, Kabul-based Afghan government official, November 17.

[2] Author's Interview, Tahir Khan, Islamabad-based Pakistani journalist, who has been covering Afghanistan for several years, November 18.

[3] Afghan official, n. 1.

[4] Khan, n.2

[5] Afghan official, n.1.

[6] Khan, n.2

The Killing of Ba Ag Moussa: France, Mali and the issue of Negotiating with Jihadists

Dario Cristiani

On November 13, the French Defense Minister Florence Parly officially announced the killing of Ba Ag Moussa, who she defined as the "military leader of the Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims [JNIM—Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen; Groupe de soutien à l'islam et aux musulmans] and one of the most important aides to the group's chief Iyad Ag Ghali."

Parly added that after France focused its attention on the area of the so-called "three frontiers"—referring to the border area of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso—and degraded the capacities of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Paris shifted its focus to undermining the capabilities of the local al-Qaeda affiliate, JNIM. Parly, in her statement, recalled the attacks of October 30 and November 6, before stressing that "France attacks whoever, in the name of their deadly ideology, go against the civilian population and try to destabilize the states of the region" ([Twitter.com/florence_parly](https://twitter.com/florence_parly), November 13).

According to the spokesman for the French General Staff, Colonel Frédéric Barbry, the soldiers tried to intercept Ag Moussa, who was travelling in a pickup truck, accompanied by four other militants, approximately 140 kilometers north of Ménaka. The occupiers of the pickup, heavily armed with machine guns and other weapons, opened fire. The clash lasted about fifteen minutes, and resulted in deaths of all the men in the pickup ([Le Figaro](https://www.lefigaro.fr), November 13).

Personal Profile

Ba Ag Moussa (sometimes spelled Bah or Ibah Ag Moussa, a.k.a. Bamoussa Diarra or Bamoussa, and with the jihadist *nom de guerre* of Abu Sharia) was born in Tin-Essago, in the area of Kidal in northern Mali in the 1970s. Some sources say he was 50 years old, but in reality, the exact date on which he was born is not known. Ag Moussa received military training in Libya, like many Touareg, during Gaddafi's years. The Malian press described him as "a historical figure in the Tuareg rebellions of the 1990s... Converted to jihadism twenty years later, he is also the most famous deserter from the Malian army" ([Le Matin {Bamako}](https://www.lematin.com), November 17).

In the 1990s, he took part in the second Touareg rebellion, which was terminated in 1996, and later was integrated into the Malian army. However, he joined future jihadist leaders—such as Iyad Ag Ghali, the future founder of Ansar Dine and later of JNIM, and Seidane Ag Hitta—in the third Tuareg rebellion, which was initiated by Hassan Ag Fagaga in 2006 ([Mali Online](https://www.mali-online.com), November 13; see [MLM](https://www.mlm.com), July 2017).

After the Tuareg rebels and the Malian government negotiated a new agreement under the auspices of the Algerian government, the so-called Algiers Agreement of 2006, he once again re-joined the army. He received the rank of colonel and was appointed commander of the special units responsible for combating insecurity in the region ([Le Matin \[Bamako\]](https://www.lematin.com), November 17).

The shockwaves created by the eruption of the Arab Spring revolution in Libya created the conditions for a new wave of destabilization in Mali (see [Terrorism Monitor](https://www.terrorism-monitor.com), April 14, 2011). In 2012, Ag Moussa deserted again, joining the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA—Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad), but, being considered close to Iyad Ag Ghaly, he quickly became part of the jihadist group Ansar Dine, with the *nom de guerre* 'Abu Sharia.' Over the years, his name

emerged on several occasions, for instance regarding the Aguelhoc massacre and the battles of Ménaka, Tessalit, and Kidal ([Mali Online](#), November 13). When the group merged with other jihadist formations, with part of the AQIM conglomeration forming JNIM, Ag Moussa allegedly became the new group's leader of military operations. This was likely the main reason why France targeted him. His name came into the spotlight for the attack in Dioura, which took place on March 17, 2019, which left at least 23 dead. In July 2019, Ag Moussa was added to the U.S. sanctions list, classifying him as a global terrorist and including him in the list of people whose assets should be frozen in the United States ([Essalama](#), July 17, 2019).

What Does his Death Mean? France's Motives for Killing Ag Moussa Now

Ba Ag Moussa is not the first high-profile member of JNIM or, more broadly speaking, of AQIM that France has killed: in May 2020, France announced the death of Abdelmalek Droukdel, the historical leader of AQIM and, at the time of his death, al-Qaeda's longest-serving leader across all the branches of its organization. In 2019, France also managed to kill Djamal Okacha and Abou Iyadh. Last year, France also announced the killing of Amadou Koufa, the head of Katiba Macina, but he later reappeared in a video, throwing a severe propaganda blow to France.

The killing of Ag Moussa, however, is the first significant development since two major recent events. First, the military coup d'état in Mali in August 2020, which terminated the government administration of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta ([Jeune Afrique](#), August 19; [Afrik](#), August 19; [Agence Malienne de Presse](#), August 21).

Second, the release of around 200 jihadist fighters in the wake of negotiations to release Soumaïla Cisse, a prominent Malian politician who was minister of finance from 1993 to 2000

and who ran for the presidency several times. He was kidnapped in March 2020, and was released alongside the French hostage Sophie Petronin and two Italian hostages, Father Pier Luigi Maccalli and Nicola Chiacchio ([Agence Malienne de Presse](#), October 9; [Il Foglio](#), October 9; [Liberation](#), October 14.)

This operation was indisputably a major strategic and propaganda success for Iyad Ag Ghaly. On top of the money received as a part of the exchange, JNIM also tried to capitalize on the release by showing Ghaly welcoming the freed militants.

The killing of Ag Moussa was not an isolated operation, however. While he is the highest-ranking jihadist to be killed in this wave of attacks, France has allegedly killed more than 40 JNIM members in several raids that were carried out following the hostages' release in October.

Malian observers wondered what the rationale is for this more assertive attitude toward JNIM: whether this approach is part of a broader strategy aimed at preparing the ground for negotiation or is, instead, the opposite, a way to sabotage any further attempt to negotiate ([Le Soir de Bamako](#), November 26).

In February 2020, the ousted Malian President Keïta announced his availability to negotiate with jihadist leaders active in the country, an offer that piqued the interest of JNIM. The group responded in March by saying that it was interested in pursuing a dialogue ([France 24](#), February 10).

Clearly, the elephant in the room of any possible negotiation between the Malian government and jihadist groups is France. The French position on whether jihadists could, and should, be considered as potential partners in a dialogue with the Malian government has evolved over the years.

In 2017, after JNIM claimed responsibility for the killing of the French soldier Julien Barbé the then-Foreign Affairs Minister, and former Prime Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, said that "There should not be the slightest doubt" that the answer to the question of "How to negotiate with the terrorists?" is "an unambiguous fight." ([Ouest-France](#), April 7, 2017).

When Mali announced the intention to open a dialogue with Malian jihadists, the current French Foreign Affairs Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said, "It is not for me to enter into a debate specific to Mali. It is the responsibility of Malians to ensure that an inclusive debate takes place... Malian officials must take the appropriate initiatives so that reconciliations can take place" ([Radio France Internationale](#), February 27). However, in November 2020, speaking to *Jeune Afrique*, the French President Emmanuel Macron was quite categorical in saying that "with terrorists, we do not talk. We fight" ([Jeune Afrique](#), November 20).

President Keïta announced the intention to open up negotiation with Malian jihadists weeks after the G5 Sahel Summit in Pau took place in January 2020. As such, given the influence of Paris over Mali, it seems unlikely that this decision was announced without some sort of green light from France. In addition, the summit in Pau clearly showed that the major concern of France and local states was Islamic State and its rise in the Sahel ([Jeune Afrique](#), January 14).

At that time, the Sahel was also one of the few areas of the world in which Islamic State and local al-Qaeda forces were actually collaborating. As such, it is likely that the Malian attempt to launch a negotiation process had a two-fold aim.

First, responding to the pressure coming from Malian civil society, which made it clear through the recommendations of the Conference of National Understanding, the National Inclusive Dialogue, and other civilian initiatives that it was

broadly supportive of a national dialogue with Malian jihadists ([Le Matin \[Bamako\]](#), November 17). Although Keïta was ousted, even the transitional power has clearly shown its intention to negotiate with Malian jihadists. The need to pursue this dialogue is widely shared in the Malian political environment.

Second, disrupting the existing ties between al-Qaeda forces and ISGS. While this alliance was neither strategic nor structural, the Sahel was likely one of the (few) areas of the jihadist space in which the members of the two organizations were often working together.

The process initiated in February/March did indeed result in further worsening the ongoing tension existing between JNIM and IS that started emerging in mid-2019 with small-scale clashes. The collaboration between the two groups thus vanished definitively, and IS acknowledged on its social media channels a number of attacks carried out against JNIM forces.

Against this backdrop, the killing of Ag Moussa suggests that France wants to maintain its point that no dialogue is possible with jihadist groups. The killing of Droukdel in May did not immediately affect the potential for negotiations in Mali, as Droukdel—although being the formal emir of AQIM—was allegedly less involved in Malian issues. However, a number of allegations made by AQIM in a video released to announce the appointment of al-Annabi as the new head of the organization might suggest that Droukdel was more present in northern Mali than usually thought. The killing of Ag Moussa, instead, has a more direct impact on the Malian and Sahelian environment and JNIM's immediate capabilities.

So, why did France ostensibly move from the possibilistic approach envisioned by Le Drian when news emerged of the possibility of a dialogue between Bamako and JNIM, to its near

closure by Macron? Likely, domestic issues are at stake in this case. Macron launched a war against what he defined as "Islamist separatism" inside France, following the wave of terrorist attacks that occurred in the country over the past few months. As such, in a battle that is perceived to be against an ideology that is considered structurally at odds with French *laïcité* (secularism) and Republican values, the idea that France can—if not actively, at least without interfering in the dialogue—accept jihadists as legitimate actors in a negotiation is unacceptable. As such, rather than weakening JNIM to allow the Malian government to negotiate from a position of strength, the killing of Ag Moussa seems likely to hurt the chances of a successful negotiation, or at least discourage any dialogue from taking place. This is despite the evident preference for negotiations that Malians, at different levels, have expressed over the past several months.

Conclusions: Is JNIM Getting Ready to Fight Back?

Ba Ag Moussa was targeted for being a crucial element within the military operational chain-of-command of the organization. As such, the military capabilities of JNIM should, at least in the immediate short-term, be significantly degraded. The multiple attacks that hit Kidal, Gao, and Ménaka against military camps housing international forces on November 30 are quite relevant, as it is likely JNIM's response to the wave of French attacks. The camps were hit by "indirect fire," according to the French army spokesman Thomas Romiguier. Only the Minusma base in Kidal suffered damage, though there were no casualties.

JNIM claimed responsibility for the attacks through one of its affiliated media groups, al-Sabat. Although the attack did not cause any casualties and material damages were limited, the fact that the group had the capacity to coordinate three simultaneous attacks in cities

hundreds of kilometers apart from each other in a relatively short period of time suggests that the killing of Ag Moussa has only partially undermined, at least, the fluidity of the military chain-of-command. The group retains remarkable operational capability ([Agence Ecofin](#), November 30; [L'Orient Le Jour](#), November 30; [Benin Web TV](#), December 1).

Attacks on international forces and their barracks are nevertheless frequent in the area, but rarely do they occur with such coordination. This is likely only JNIM's first response in what could be a series of attacks against the French presence in the region. These attacks were likely a message by JNIM, showcasing how its military's operational capacities have not been affected by the killing of Ag Moussa.

Ag Moussa's story was similar to that of many Malian Tuaregs—including JNIM leader Iyad Ag Ghali—having fought for the Tuareg independentist cause before moving to jihad. He was indeed a relevant player within JNIM, but the group has the strength and the depth to survive deaths in its leadership, as its increased activities in the region over the past five years demonstrate. For France, his killing was the first major operation after the Malian coup d'état and the release of hostages, and a way to show its renewed assertiveness in denying any chance of a dialogue with regional jihadist forces.

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Abu Muhammad al-Masri and Husam Abd al-Rauf—Death of Top Leaders Raise Questions About the Future of al-Qaeda

Shan A. Zain.

The global jihadist group al-Qaeda is experiencing an unprecedented crisis, having lost several key members of its central leadership this year. The latest prominent al-Qaeda figure to be killed is Abu Muhammad al-Masri, one of two deputies to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Reports about his death came just days after Husam Abd al-Rauf, the group's chief propagandist, was killed in Afghanistan by U.S. and Afghan forces. Recent unconfirmed reports even suggest that al-Zawahiri himself is dead and the group has been without a leader for months.

This year also witnessed the death of several other top al-Qaeda officials, including Qasim al-Raymi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Abdelmalek Droukdel (a.k.a. Abu Musab Abd al-Wadud), the chief of al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni and Abu Muhammad al-Sudani, its top commanders in Syria. Such back-to-back leadership losses and setbacks in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (“Af-Pak”) region, Syria, and Yemen leave al-Qaeda in disarray and bring questions over the group's future resilience.

Abu Muhammad al-Masri: A Strategic Loss for al-Qaeda

Perhaps the most severe blow to al-Qaeda is the death of Abu Muhammad al-Masri who was widely tipped to succeed the current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. According to reports, al-Masri was killed by Israeli agents in the Iranian

capital Tehran last month. His death was initially reported by a jihadist channel on the messaging app Telegram. The channel claimed al-Masri and his daughter Miriyam were killed and that al-Qaeda leadership was covering up the news. The rumor gained greater credibility when, on November 14, Western media widely reported his death, citing government sources ([Al-Sharq al-Awsat](#), November 15).

Al-Qaeda has yet to confirm or deny reports of al-Masri's death, but key jihadist supporters have written eulogies in his honor even in the absence of official al-Qaeda communication on the development—a testimony to his status among loyal jihadist supporters. A notable tribute came from Nuruddin, a prominent al-Qaeda follower widely respected and trusted by jihadists online. In his eulogy, Nuruddin gave a brief biography of al-Masri, highlighting his lengthy jihadist career alongside the late al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. He lauded al-Masri's involvement in the deadly 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and said bin Laden had entrusted him with difficult and dangerous al-Qaeda missions ([Al-Araby.co.uk](#), November 19; Telegram, November 17).

Al-Masri's death is a significant strategic loss to al-Qaeda not least because he was considered by many to be the successor to al-Zawahiri. He was one of the few remaining founders of al-Qaeda and had lately taken on a renewed role to restore the group's lost glory, with a focus on Syria. He was also among a handful of al-Qaeda veterans with vast jihadist experience and leadership skills.

Unlike al-Qaeda's other senior members, al-Masri had barely featured in the group's videos or publications. Al-Qaeda may have kept him out of its propaganda in order to keep his status and whereabouts secret for security reasons. However, the fact that al-Masri was killed in Iran—a country al-Qaeda allegedly views as a staunch enemy, but has cooperated with in the past—is indeed an embarrassment to the jihadist

group and could be used by its rivals, such as Islamic State, to tarnish its reputation ([Alhurra.com](#), November 15).

Husam Abd al-Rauf: Challenges to al-Qaeda's Media Operations

Al-Masri's death came on the heels of the killing of Husam Abd al-Rauf, a seasoned jihadist and an al-Qaeda central official who has served the group over the years in several different roles. Al-Rauf was killed by U.S. and Afghan forces in Ghazni province, Afghanistan, on October 24. As with al-Masri, al-Qaeda has not yet commented on his death, but influential jihadists online have widely mourned al-Rauf ([Akhbarelyom.com](#), October 25; Telegram, October 25).

Until his death, al-Rauf was the second most public figure of the organization, with a profile in al-Qaeda's hierarchy only less prominent than al-Zawahiri. Al-Rauf, apart from his primary role running al-Qaeda's media machine, is believed to have been acting as a deputy to al-Zawahiri. He was involved in overseeing the day-to-day operations of the group.

Al-Rauf's absence is likely to weaken al-Qaeda on two fronts. First, his demise is a major blow to al-Qaeda's propaganda dissemination as it comes at a time when the group struggled to deliver timely messages on leadership. Al-Qaeda has recently faced issues with their media operations, often resulting in messages from al-Zawahiri being released only after a severe delay. Even al-Rauf had become less active in recent months, with his own messages experiencing delay on some occasions. His last contribution to al-Qaeda propaganda was an unremarkable article in August 2019 in the second edition of the group's new Arabic magazine, *One Ummah*.

Second, al-Qaeda has lost a key man in its heartland of the 'Khorasan' region, where the group is looking at an uncertain future following

the signing of a peace deal between the Taliban and the United States, under which the former pledged to sever its ties with al-Qaeda. Al-Rauf, a jihadist veteran who has spent most of his time in Afghanistan and Pakistan, was well connected with the militants in the region. He was responsible for working with the Taliban on operational cooperation and in finding safe havens for al-Qaeda fighters. Afghan authorities were quick to blame the Taliban for harboring al-Qaeda members following the killing of al-Rauf. Afghan Interior Minister Masoud Andarabi said Taliban fighters were protecting al-Rauf when he was killed and that his killing showed that both al-Qaeda and the Taliban still maintained close ties in breach of the peace agreement ([Pajhowk News](#), October 25, [Tolo News](#), October 26).

Whether al-Qaeda will officially name another central spokesperson to fill in the shoes of al-Rauf remains to be seen. It would not be a surprise if officials from al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), the group's South Asian branch, take the lead in managing the group's central media operation. AQIS' media operations appear to be on a strong footing. Al-Qaeda's main website al-Sahab, apart from by al-Qaeda's central command, has been heavily featuring content from AQIS, suggesting AQIS figures may already have some role in managing the platform. AQIS has recently ramped up its media campaign under a new media commission led by clerics such as Muthanna Hassan. Under Muthanna Hassan, AQIS has issued several propaganda messages, and more importantly streamlined the publication of the long-standing Urdu magazine, *Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad*.

It is also pertinent to note that the current leaders of most of al-Qaeda's branches are all experienced in communication, meaning the group has a strong pool of charismatic members to deliver messages. For example, Khalid al-Batarfi, the leader of AQAP, has vast experience in his group's media operations, appearing in

several videos, including those calling for attacks in the West. AQIM's newly-appointed leader Abu Ubaydah Yusuf al-Annabi has acted as one of AQIM's media chiefs and regularly appeared in propaganda videos. AQIS's presumed leader Osama Mahmoud is also a well-versed scholar, having delivered several messages and written several books on jihadism.

Saif al-Adl: Next in Line to Lead al-Qaeda?

If reports about the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Muhammad al-Masri are confirmed, Saif al-Adl, one of the last remaining al-Qaeda founders, is the most likely candidate to lead the global jihadist group. Al-Adl is the sole survivor among five senior al-Qaeda heavyweights who were released from jail in Iran in 2015. While three of the freed leaders made their way to Syria, al-Adl and al-Masri reportedly stayed in Iran. He was detained in Iran after fleeing the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 ([Annahar al-Arabi](#), September 9).

Saif al-Adl is highly skilled in operations and is well-versed in al-Qaeda's literature. He was reportedly in charge of bin Ladin's security and was a key strategist within the group. Like Abu Muhammad al-Masri, al-Adl is believed to have played an important role in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya ([Alhurra.com](#), November 16).

He has in the past written extensively on security, combat, and strategy for jihadists. His major work is a three-part book entitled "Conflict and the Winds of Change" in which he discusses a wide range of topics from uprisings to guerrilla warfare and armed jihad. He has kept a low profile in recent years and has barely featured in al-Qaeda propaganda ([24.ae](#), February 20).

However, some recent developments point towards his presumed elevated position in the al-Qaeda hierarchy. For example, earlier this year,

al-Qaeda supporters promoted a channel on Telegram dedicated to writings by Saif al-Adl. The channel refers to al-Adl as "al-Qa'id," which translates to "commander" or "leader" and aims to promote his extensive knowledge of military and geopolitical affairs. In February 2017, al-Qaeda indicated al-Adl was alive and published an old lecture of his in which he incited attacks against the West. In August 2019, al-Qaeda supporters widely shared an undated document that included recommendations attributed to al-Adl about the state of jihad in Syria amid an offensive against al-Qaeda-affiliated militants in the country (Telegram, August 14, 2019).

The FBI has placed him on its list of most wanted terrorists and indicates he was born in 1960 or 1963. Like many al-Qaeda jihadists, al-Adl is believed to have started his jihadist career with the Egyptian Islamic Jihad.

What is Next for al-Qaeda Central?

An urgent task for a new al-Qaeda leader, such as al-Adl, would be restoring faith in the group's central leadership, whose power has undoubtedly waned over the years. A lack of consistent messaging from the core leadership has frustrated the group's supporters and strengthened doubts over the efficiency of al-Qaeda's top echelon. Al-Zawahiri only appeared in two propaganda videos in 2020, that were presumably pre-recorded productions. His message on the anniversary of 9/11 primarily focused on criticizing a documentary released in July 2019 by Qatari-funded al-Jazeera TV. Strangely, the al-Qaeda leader did not discuss recent developments such as deals to normalize relations between the UAE, Bahrain, and Israel despite the message being titled "Deal of the Century or the Crusade of the Century?" Such dated commentaries have given weight to speculation that al-Zawahiri may be incapacitated or dead. In the absence of al-Zawahiri videos, al-Qaeda has been communicating with its followers through written

statements by the group's "General Command" (Telegram, September 11; Akhbaralaan.net September 12; Sahabmedia.co September 11).

New leadership also faces the uphill task of reviving al-Qaeda's franchises that have struggled in recent years. In Syria, al-Qaeda, represented by its local branch Hurras al-Din, has gone quiet, following a power struggle with the powerful jihadist alliance, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Several of Hurras al-Din's key commanders, including Abu Muhammad al-Sudani, Abu Qassam al-Urduni and Abu Khallad al-Mohandis, were killed in recent months, furthering damaging al-Qaeda's Syria project (Orientnews.net, October 27, Al-Sharq al-Awsat, June 15).

Similarly, al-Qaeda's Yemen branch AQAP has also suffered severe blows recently, making it one of the least active al-Qaeda branches. AQAP, once al-Qaeda's most lethal branch, lost its leader Qasim al-Raymi and suffered territorial setbacks when it was defeated by Houthi rebels in its stronghold of al-Bayda.

Perhaps the biggest of all challenges for al-Qaeda would be making a survival plan for its central leadership based in the Af-Pak region if the Taliban fulfills its promise to disown its ally. Several of al-Qaeda's central command officials have been killed in the region over the past few years. AQIS' role would be important in ensuring a haven for the jihadist group's central figures in the region, but it remains to be seen how successful the group would be in this mission, particularly in the wake of a sustained military campaign by U.S. and Afghan forces. Last month, Afghan forces claimed to have killed another senior member of AQIS, Muhammad Hanif in Taliban-controlled territory (Dawn, November 11).

Another tricky act for al-Qaeda's new administration would be controlling the actions

of its strongest branches such as Somalia's al-Shabaab and the Mali-focused Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), which also operates in Burkina Faso and occasionally in Niger. These groups wage jihad based on local principles which could sometimes contradict their parent group's rigid jihadist perspective. Ensuring their full loyalty could be a difficult task, particularly in the wake of the central command's perceived weakness and its lack of a charismatic leader.

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