

# MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

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### Waziristan Militant Leader Aleem Khan Ustad Joins Tehreek-e-Taliban

*Abdul Sayed*

On December 15, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, the emir of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), appeared in a video released by Umar Media, the official media arm of TTP ([Umar Media](#), December 15). This video demonstrated a continuation of the series of mergers of Pakistani jihadist groups into TTP, which started in July 2020.

The video contains footage of the *bay'ah* (oath of allegiance) ceremonies of two jihadist organizations from Waziristan, Pakistan, including Mulawi Aleem Khan Ustad, and Commander Umar Azzam groups. Khan is a powerful jihadist commander who joined TTP with nine commanders and dozens of fighters ([Tribal News](#), November 28).

TTP announced the mergers of both groups into its ranks on November 27 ([Umar Media](#), November 27). The video shows that the merger ceremony apparently took place outside Afghanistan, most probably in Waziristan's

remote areas bordering the country. The footages include video clips of both commanders' oath-taking, holding Mehsud's hands and announcing their pledges of allegiance to him.

### Who is Mulawi Aleem Khan Ustad?

Aleem Khan is from the tribal North Waziristan district, in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which served as the base of al-Qaeda for more than a decade after 9/11, from 2004 to 2015 ([Asia Times](#), November 5). Khan was deputy to Hafiz Gul Bahadur—the al-Qaeda host and shadow governor of Waziristan ([Gandhara](#), March 16, 2015). The Gul Bahadur group became the largest local group in Waziristan between 2008 and 2014 and even hosted TTP in North Waziristan after the organization lost its strongholds in neighboring South Waziristan.

Gul Bahadur's decline started after the 2014 military operation in North Waziristan, when the jihadists escaping that military operation sought shelter in Afghanistan. [1] Khan disassociated from Bahadur that same year and since then has

operated independently ([The News](#), August 20, 2014).

During this period, serious differences emerged that would divide Khan and Bahadur, resulting in the latter ultimately seeking leadership of the group ([The News](#), August 20, 2014). Bahadur alleged that Khan was in league with the Pakistani government, and in return was receiving protection for his areas and tribesmen from military operations. As a reaction to this accusation, Khan announced that he was now emir of the group, removing Bahadur, who had moved to the Afghanistan side of the border to escape military operations.

A few months later, Aleem Khan somewhat confirmed what Bahadur had accused him of when he surprisingly announced an end to the war against the Pakistani Army, and offered his group's assistance in returning the internally displaced people (IDPs) of North Waziristan back to their homes. Like thousands of others from North Waziristan, these IDPs had left their homes due to the military operations that took place in 2014. His group had taken responsibility for restoring peace in North Waziristan and threatened military operations against all those aiming to engage in an insurgency against the state ([Daily Pakistan](#), March 16 2015).

Thus, the merger of the Aleem Khan group into TTP is important from two perspectives. First, it is a major blow to the Pakistani Army's efforts to coopt the anti-state militants in Waziristan for peace and the restoration of government authority in the area ([Gandahara](#), July 24 2018). Second, Khan's *bay'ah* to TTP is the first time that a jihadist group from North Waziristan is joining the organization. It is particularly significant that Khan's group is a strong splinter of the Gul Bahadur organization.

The TTP and the Gul Bahadur group share a history of rivalry rooted in the tribal politics of

the region. The senior leadership of al-Qaeda, particularly its Afghanistan-Pakistan chief, Mustafa Abu Yazid, tried to unify the TTP and Bahadur group, but the latter did not accept it for long [2]. Gul Bahadur's rejection has roots in the historical tribal feuds between Mehsuds and Wazir tribes of Waziristan. The Wazirs consider themselves superior to Mehsuds [3]. Thus, Gul Bahadur, being the strongest leader of the Wazir tribes, never agreed to merge into TTP, which was led by the Mehsuds.

### **TTP Emir Emphasizes Unity**

A major portion of the Umar Media video consists of Mufti Mehsud's speech to a large gathering of TTP commanders, including members of the newly merged groups. The speech mainly focused on unity among the jihadist groups fighting against the Pakistani state. The TTP emir presents the Middle East's jihadist landscape as an example, which he says collapsed despite conquering large territories in Iraq and Syria, resulting in Islamic State's caliphate. According to him, jihadists lost power there due to infighting and divisions.

Mufti Mehsud says that something similar happened in Pakistan. He mentions that the jihadist groups emerged as a massive threat to the state, but they soon lost their momentum due to infighting and disunity. He portrays the Afghan Taliban as a role model, which, according to him, possesses thousands of drawbacks but remains an internationally recognized power due to unity in its ranks. He specifically referenced U.S. President Donald Trump's remarks praising the Taliban, calling them brave fighters ([Urdu News](#), March 1). Mufti Mehsud called on all Pakistani jihadist groups to join together to reach their final goal of implementing Sharia law.

### **A Series of TTP Mergers**

The series of mergers into TTP started in early July when Hakeem Ullah Mehsud group, a TTP splinter group, announced its dissolution and incorporation back into TTP ([Umar Media](#), July 6). A few weeks later, in August, another two powerful TTP splinters, Jumat ul-Ahrar (JuA) and Hizb ul-Ahrar (HuA), merged back into TTP ([Umar Media](#), August 17). JuA was founded by Commander Abdul Wali Mohmand, a.k.a. Umar Khalid Khurasani, in 2014. Khurasani is one of the founders of TTP. HuA splintered from JuA in 2017, and up to recently was the most active terrorist group in Pakistan (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), December 17, 2019). Similarly, the Saif Ullah Kurd faction of the notorious Sunni sectarian group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), now headed by Khushi Muhammad, also merged into TTP on August 5 ([Umar Media](#), August 5). The Kurd faction of LeJ has remained active in Baluchistan province, particularly in its capital Quetta, having claimed responsibility for the killings of hundreds of Shias Muslims (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), July 26, 2016).

Aside from these splinter organizations, two major Pakistani al-Qaeda groups also announced their merger into TTP at the end of July ([Umar Media](#), July 29). Commander Muneeb, a close aide of the slain AQIS deputy chief Ustad Ahmad Farooq, merged his group into TTP. Farooq was the senior leader of al-Qaeda in Pakistan and played a leading role in establishing and expanding its Pakistan. [4] At the same time, al-Qaeda's Amjad Farooqi group also joined TTP. The Amjad Farooqi group was al-Qaeda's earliest ally in Pakistan and one of the founders of post-9/11 jihadist terrorism in the country. The group carried out most of the sophisticated high-profile attacks in Pakistan, including multiple attacks targeting General Pervez Musharraf in 2004, an attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team, and attack on the General Headquarters of the Pakistani army in Rawalpindi in 2009. [5]

## Conclusion

The Aleem Khan group is the first militant group of Waziri tribes from North Waziristan to join TTP, following a recent series of mergers that started in June 2020. This implies that the TTP, under the leadership of Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, has grown past the days of 2013-2014, which was defined by infighting between its Mehsud groups of Wali-ur-Rehman and Hakeem Ullah. Today, the TTP has surprisingly recovered from internal turmoil, and appears to be growing. The joining of a powerful splinter faction of Bahadur's group from North Waziristan shows that the TTP is organizationally becoming more powerful than the group was during its peak years of 2009-2012.

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## Notes

[1] See for details, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, *Inqilab-i-Mehsud*, (Mehsuds Revolution) [In Urdu], (Al-Shahab Publishers: Paktika, 2017).

[2] Ustad Ahmad Farooq, "*Shaikh Saeed (Mustafa Abu Yazid)*", *Hitteen*, Issue 9, pp. 117-138

[3] Mehsud, 2017.

[4] Ustad Ahmad Farooq, *Pakistan mi jihad jari rihna chaheay* [In Urdu: Jihad should continue in Pakistan], Hitteen Publications, Oct 2016.

[5] For details on Amjad Farooqi and his group, see, Mujahid Hussain, *Punjabi Taliban: Driving Extremism in Pakistan*, (Pentagon Press: New Delhi, India, 2012).

## Sayf Abdulrab Salem al-Hayashi: AQAP's Financial Conduit to the Yemen-Somalia Weapons Trade

Peter Kirechu

On September 17, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Crime released a public report detailing the use of *hawala* remittance exchanges in the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons between Yemen and Somalia. [1] The report identified nearly \$3.7 million in financial transactions executed between 2014 and 2020 by a network of six prominent Yemeni and Somali weapons dealers. It also identified Sayf Abdulrab Salem al-Hayashi, a U.S.-designated weapons trafficker linked to both al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Yemen's Islamic State affiliate, as a key figure in this illicit financial ecosystem. Al-Hayashi reportedly appeared in approximately \$1.2 million worth of *hawala* transactions between October 2016 and April 2020. Those transactions revealed previously undisclosed methods and tactics used to illicitly finance and supply illegal weapons to Somalia-based armed groups ([GI-TOC](#), September 17).

Al-Hayashi was first designated as an AQAP and Islamic State weapons trafficker and financier on October 25, 2017 as part of a collective sanctioning action led by the United States and the Gulf-based Terrorist Financial Targeting Center (TFTC) – a sanctions targeting taskforce established by the governments of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman ([U.S. Treasury Department](#), October 25, 2017). The 2017 designation described al-Hayashi as a Yemen-based weapons dealer who used money exchange businesses in

Shabwah and Hadramout to illicitly purchase, trade and distribute contraband, narcotics and weapons to Mukalla, Sana'a and other areas in Yemen. He reportedly traveled across the country, meeting with senior AQAP leaders whose finances he managed. But while much of his publicly-exposed profile was limited to Yemen, the GI-TOC report revealed extensive ties between al-Hayashi and a network of illicit arms traders in both Yemen and Somalia.

Al-Hayashi's weapons trafficking activities date back to 1994, when he reportedly shifted operations from al-Bayda to Shabwa. He supposedly established a money exchange business alongside two food stores identified as "al-Khayr Supermarket" and located in Azzan, in the central Shabwa governorate, and in Fuwwah, in the eastern Hadramawt governorate ([U.S. Treasury Department](#), October 25, 2017). Both locations served as weapons smuggling hubs and at least one of them – the Hadramawt-based facility – was raided by the UAE-funded Hadramawt Elite Forces in 2016 ([Yemen Voice](#), October 26, 2017). It also seemingly provided money exchange services through the Cooperative & Agricultural Credit Bank (CAC) Bank of Yemen. [2] These links to money exchange services appeared instrumental to the broader weapons trafficking enterprise revealed in the GI-TOC report.

Al-Hayashi reportedly worked in concert with a Somalia-based weapons trafficking network executing approximately \$1.2 million in *hawala* transactions directly and indirectly through a proxy financial courier ([GI-TOC](#), September 17). The majority of his transactions involved a Somalia-based trafficker identified as Abdirahman Mohammed Omar (a.k.a. "Dhofaye"). Dhofaye was first identified in 2017 as a weapons trafficker by U.N. embargo monitors

in Somalia. His trafficking activities included supplying illicit weapons to northeastern Somalia's semi-autonomous Puntland region, where both Islamic State and al-Shabaab have a fractious, competing operational presence ([U.N. Panel of Experts Report](#), 2017). U.N. investigators in 2017 found that Dhofaye was implicated in the illicit transfers of AK-pattern rifles and PKM machine guns to the Puntland region from the seat of al-Hayashi's smuggling operations in both Shawba and Hadramawt ([U.N. Panel of Experts Report](#), 2017).

Analysis of both al-Hayashi and Dhofaye's communication and financial transaction records confirmed direct interactions between the two from 2016 and 2020. After his 2017 sanctions designation, Al-Hayashi's financial transactions with the Somalia-based network of weapons traffickers continued, but this time through a proxy identified as Bashir Naaji Abdullahi Shujac. Some of these transactions were high dollar value transfers of over \$10,000 in single transactions, and involved at least two *hawala* remittance providers, namely Amal and Iftin Express. And while Somali remittance providers are subject to financial due diligence requirements that mandate screening for suspicious transactions involving sanctioned customers, al-Hayashi seemingly evaded these controls and continued to operate ([GI-TOC](#), September 17).

GI-TOC investigators found that al-Hayashi used at least eight different phone numbers and at least six different aliases to execute financial transactions between Yemen and Somalia. And while the 2017 sanctions designation revealed six of his aliases, he appeared to simply pivot to an alternate set of identities to evade detection ([GI-TOC](#), September 17). The aliases used in the Somali remittance transactions included

alternate renderings of the aliases identified back in 2017. This revealed stark vulnerabilities in the traditional transaction-screening mechanism, which is easily deceived and potentially defeated by moderate changes in naming and spelling conventions as displayed below.

| <b>Sayf Abdulrab Salem al-Hayashi (Aliases identified by the U.S. Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC))</b> | <b>Sayf Abdulrab Salem al-Hayashi (Aliases identified in Somali Remittance transaction receipts)</b> |
|--|--|
| Sayf al-Baydani  | Abdiraba Abdirab Salim   |
| Sayf Husayn 'Abd al-Rabb al-Baydani  | Abdiraba Abdirab Salim al-Baydaani   |
| Saif al-Bhadani  | Abdiraba Abdirab Salim al-Baydanni   |
| Sayf al-Bidhani  | Abdiraba Abdirab Salim Baydaani  |
| Sayf 'Abd-al-Rab Salim   | Abdirabi Abdirabi Salim al-Baydani   |
| Sayf 'Abd-al-wali 'Abd-al-rub  | Abdi Rabh Abdi Rabi Saalim Beydaani  |

Al-Hayashi's financial activity in the post-sanctions era suggests that his financial facilitation on behalf of armed groups in both Yemen and Somalia is continuous and ongoing. It also exposes substantial flaws in the *hawala* remittance system and the prevailing vulnerabilities of the Somali financial system to terrorist and militant financing. These failures are abetted by poor administrative capacity and limited surveillance and control of Somalia's domestic financial sector. These flaws enable militant financiers like al-Hayashi—and others of his ilk—to profit and exploit an already-vibrant trade in illicit weapons in Yemen in order to supply armed groups in Somalia.

Al-Hayashi's use of the *hawala* remittance system reveals substantial flaws in ongoing efforts to disrupt illicit financial flows to militant groups in Yemen and Somalia. Both conflicts involve a variety of competing militant and terrorist groups, each seeking to finance militant operations and illicit weapons purchases through the financial ecosystem exploited by Al-Hayashi. And while *hawala* systems provide essential financial services to vulnerable citizens in both countries, they remain vulnerable to criminal and terror-related infiltration. The full scale of Al-Hayashi's illicit financial activities is difficult to discern. But the vulnerabilities he exploited exist elsewhere in the *hawala* industry more broadly. These flaws are likely exploited by other terror financiers and are an essential – though sometimes underappreciated – component of the terror financing ecosystem that currently sustains both al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Yemen and Somalia.

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## Notes

[1] The *hawala* money transfer system is an informal remittance service that often operates outside of, or in parallel to, traditional banking systems. The *hawala* system is a trust-based service that allows participants to access, receive, and transfer money without the physical movement of cash. Participants send money, sometimes across borders, by paying a small transaction fee to a network of providers that receives deposits and facilitates equivalent withdrawals by the receiving party. For additional details on the *hawala* system and its money laundering and terrorism financing

risks, see: The Role of *hawala* and Other Similar Service Providers in Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing, Financial Action Task Force (FATF), October 2013, <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/media/fatf/documents/reports/Role-of-hawala-and-similar-in-ml-tf.pdf>

[2] See CAC Bank Electronic Service Locations, #100: <https://www.cacbank.com.ye/ar-YE/Contents/SubPage/CAC-POS>

## Debretsion Gebremichael: The Leader Behind the Rebellion in Tigray

*Michael Horton*

Before the conflict in Tigray began on November 4, not many people outside of the region had heard of Debretsion Gebremichael. The 57-year-old leader of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) prefers it that way. Before his rise to prominence on the national front in Ethiopia, Gebremichael was a patient and dedicated leader within the TPLF during its 20-year battle against the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam. Gebremichael interrupted his studies for an engineering degree to join the TPLF and its fight against Mengistu's oppressive Marxist Derg government.

As a fighter within the TPLF, Gebremichael's specialty was communications. He set up a clandestine radio station called Dimitsi Woyane Tigray (Voice of the Revolution in Tigray) that broadcasted news of the TPLF's fight against the Derg. The radio station used mobile transmitters that could be disassembled and moved to caves to avoid detection. At the same time, Gebremichael led and trained teams of radio operators charged with listening in on and decrypting the communications of Mengistu's troops. The communications intercept teams operated within and near enemy lines where, if detected, they would most often be summarily executed. In the early years of his career as a rebel in charge of communications, Gebremichael often conducted in the field training with radio operators deployed behind enemy lines. [1]

### **Patient Rise to Power**

After the TPLF, with the help of allied rebel groups, overthrew Mengistu's regime in 1991, Gebremichael worked with Kinife Gebremedhin,

who was Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's point man on intelligence and internal security until a fellow military officer murdered him in May 2001 ([Sudan Tribune](#), August 6, 2007). While working as an aide to Gebremedhin, Gebremichael finished a graduate degree in electrical engineering. Gebremedhin, before his death in 2001, was the second most influential, and likely feared, man in Zenawi's government. Rather than liberalize freedom of the press and freedom of speech more generally, the Zenawi government, dominated by the TPLF, modeled many of the tactics used by the Derg. Press freedom was restricted and the communications of government officials, dissidents, and those suspected of being dissidents were all subject to monitoring.

It is all but certain that Gebremichael played a significant role in developing and deploying what would become a pervasive surveillance network in Ethiopia. In 2005, after years in the shadow of other TPLF officials, Gebremichael was appointed director of Ethiopia's Information and Communications Development Agency (EICDA). There, he oversaw the buildout of Ethiopia's telecommunication networks. At the same time, Gebremichael maintained close ties with Ethiopia's primary intelligence service, the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS). By 2012, he was influential enough to be appointed Minister of Communications and Information Technology.

As Ethiopians' access to the internet and mobile communications increased, the government enhanced its ability to monitor those communications. As the man charged with overseeing Ethiopia's telecommunications networks, Gebremichael played a pivotal role in enhancing the government's ability to monitor communications. "He more than any of the intelligence officials was the keeper of the nation's secrets," a former member of the Ethiopian military said. "That brings with it a lot

of power. But for most of his time in office, he was quiet with that power.” [2]

While overseeing the rapid buildout and expansion of Ethiopia’s telecommunication networks, Gebremichael was also charged with overseeing key aspects of the construction of Ethiopia’s hydropower facilities. As chairman of the state-run Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation, he spearheaded negotiations with investors and backers of Ethiopia’s largest hydroelectric project, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

Gebremichael’s impressive portfolio and his reputation for securing funding from international investors should have guaranteed his continued rise in government. However, the reserved Gebremichael was no match for Abiy Ahmed, who soundly beat him in a vote for the chairmanship of what was Ethiopia’s ruling coalition party, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), in March 2018 ([Nazret](#), March 27, 2018). Abiy Ahmed went on to become Ethiopia’s prime minister in April 2018. With a rapidity that surprised most Ethiopia watchers, Abiy embraced a full slate of political reforms. In his first year in office, thousands of political prisoners were released, a border dispute with Eritrea was resolved, and some reforms of the security sector were enacted ([Africa News](#), January 23, 2019; [Africa News](#), April 15, 2018).

In November 2019, Abiy announced the voluntary dissolution of the EPRDF, which had long governed Ethiopia, and its replacement with the Prosperity Party ([Nazret](#), December 8). The TPLF refused to join the new coalition. This refusal marked Gebremichael’s and the TPLF’s retreat to Tigray.

### **A Return to War?**

Gebremichael was elected chairman of the TPLF in 2017. Following the election of Abiy

Ahmed as chairman of the EPRDF and then Ethiopian prime minister, Gebremichael turned his attention to regional politics in Tigray. He likely saw that the TPLF’s time as kingmaker in national politics was over. As Abiy moved ahead with reforms aimed at shifting Ethiopia away from ethno-federalism, Gebremichael and the TPLF were determined to defend regional authority, at least in the Tigray region. This culminated in the TPLF’s decision to hold regional elections in September 2020, in defiance of Abiy’s government ([Ethiopia Insight](#), September 9). The Abiy government had delayed elections due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The Ethiopian government declared the elections in Tigray null and void; the TPLF called the government’s postponement of the elections unconstitutional.

On November 4, troops from the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) clashed with TPLF forces in the regional capital of Mekelle ([TRT World](#), November 6). Following skirmishes between the two forces, the ENDF seized the primary road leading in and out of Mekelle. On November 28, Abiy’s government announced that it had captured Mekelle ([Nazret](#), November 28). The TPLF, which had at least a 100,000 men and women fighters, seems to have carried out a strategic retreat from Tigray’s major towns, including Mekelle.

Given his nearly twenty-year career as a rebel and guerrilla fighter, Gebremichael understood the advantages of withdrawing to Tigray’s mountainous terrain. Many of Ethiopia’s most experienced military and intelligence officers serve in the ranks of the TPLF. Besides its human resources, the TPLF possesses caches of heavy and medium weapons that were likely repositioned and hidden well-ahead of the outbreak of hostilities.

Debretsion Gebremichael now tops an Ethiopian government list of 64 TPLF officials wanted for arrest ([Ethiopia Monitor](#), November 12). This



follows reports of ethnic-based crackdowns on Tigrayan officials and business owners in other parts of Ethiopia. This does not bode well for a negotiated solution to the conflict in Tigray. Gebremichael and the TPLF are skilled guerrilla fighters who enjoy considerable local support. If Gebremichael and those advising him choose to fight a protracted guerrilla war in Tigray, they have the experience and means to do so. This does not mean they will be victorious, but such a war will be costly in both human and economic terms.

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## Notes

[1] Author interview with Ethiopian historian, December 2020.

[2] Author interview with ex-Ethiopian military official, November 2020.

## Michigan's Wolverine Watchmen: A Mosaic of Boogaloo, Right-Wing, and Anarchist Militiamen

*Jacob Zenn*

Since a wave of protests spread across the United States after George Floyd's death in May 2020, one armed movement that has attracted significant attention is the Boogaloo Bois. A Google Trends search of "Boogaloo" indicates the name was virtually unknown until its mentions skyrocketed on May 31. [1] On one end, the movement's name, which mimics "Big Luau" or "Big Igloo," is distinctly Americana: nowhere in the world but the U.S. would a group employ such references. The funny sounding name, moreover, makes the movement easy to remember: *Boogaloo*. Movement members' Hawaiian-style "uniforms" equally makes them stand out.

Beyond the movement's name, clothing and memes, however, is an unequivocal anti-police and anti-government ideology. At least six of 13 Michigan Wolverine Watchmen militiamen charged with plotting to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer are also Boogaloo adherents. Like Boogaloo, this Michigan militia cannot be easily pigeon-holed ideologically. The Michigan militia is not particularly right-wing or left-wing, but rather anti-government and anti-police. That being said, the militiamen's idiosyncratic beliefs, including opposition to vaccines, COVID-19 lockdown measures, and gun restrictions, tend to align with right-wing views. Nevertheless, some of their anarchist and pro-Black Lives Matter leanings are generally associated with the Left.

This article presents a profile of 13 Michigan Wolverine Watchmen militiamen and

demonstrates that the group's ideology is closer to that of the Boogaloo Bois than anything else.

### **A Boogaloo Trio**

Among the 13 Michigan Wolverine Watchmen militiamen, three of them – Paul Bellar, Eric Molitor and Joseph Morrison - were explicitly Boogaloo. Bellar was a U.S. Army veteran and won the Barry County, Michigan Sheriff Posse's annual gun raffle in 2019 ([bcsheriffposse.com](http://bcsheriffposse.com), 2019). He was charged, among other things, with providing materials to support terrorist acts and felony firearms possession ([mlive.com](http://mlive.com), October 10). Although he usually resides in Michigan, where he had been a firefighter cadet several years earlier while in high school, he was arrested in South Carolina, where his father lives ([police1.com](http://police1.com), October 11).

Bellar's father was surprised his son held anti-government views. In this respect, Bellar resembled another Wolverine Watchman, Kaleb Franks, whose friends had neither heard him express strong opinions on politics nor knew he was acquainted with any of the Wolverine Watchmen. Franks was also more reluctant than other Wolverine Watchmen to kidnap Governor Whitmer. He even stated during training that he was “not cool with offensive kidnapping” and was “just there for training” ([freep.com](http://freep.com), October 11).

Bellar, however, may have been able to keep his father in the dark about his activities because he became increasingly radicalized only after Governor Whitmer imposed COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in Michigan. Bellar, for example, attended a June 21 anti-lockdown “Judgement Day” rally in Lansing, Michigan, to protest Whitmer's stay-at-home order ([wxyz.com](http://wxyz.com), May 14). After that rally, Bellar was interviewed by the Swedish newspaper *Expressen* and explained to its journalists that he “had enough of the tyrannical government.” He also

told the journalists about the “Boogaloo movement” and his fellow rally-goers belonging to Boogaloo. At the same time, Bellar indicated he “might get in trouble” for saying that, which suggests he was attempting to keep his Boogaloo affiliation under wraps ([wtvr.com](http://wtvr.com), October 12). This also may be why Bellar's father did not know he was a Boogaloo member.

Typical of Boogaloo members, Bellar used an encrypted online chat program to communicate with fellow members. He told the Swedish journalists that his online chats included women, veterans, and others from all age groups and backgrounds, which reflects Boogaloo's non-identitarian beliefs. Although Bellar stated he had no intention to “burn anything,” he said he believed “American civilization” was under threat and there was a need to “protect our country” ([wtvr.com](http://wtvr.com), October 12).

Eric Molitor, meanwhile, made references to Boogaloo on Facebook, such as: “Fuc\* this government...this is why the boog is coming. We gotta stand against this shi\*.” Molitor also asserted on social media that “old combat hardened vets” would make Kyle Rittenhouse's actions, including the killing of two Black Lives Matter supporters who were chasing him in Kenosha, Wisconsin last August 25, seem like a “daydream.” This vague statement, however, did not mean Molitor supported Rittenhouse, whose pro-police orientation runs contrary to Boogaloo ideology. Like Bellar, who took part in a political rally, Molitor's engagement in political activism involved attending a Wexford County, Michigan meeting and advocating a resolution to make Wexler a gun “sanctuary county,” which later passed ([freep.com](http://freep.com), October 11).

Like Bellar and Molitor, Joseph Morrison was also involved in Boogaloo. His nickname was “Boogaloo Bunyan.” Similar to Bellar, Morrison joined the Marines, but was discharged. Born with fetal alcohol syndrome, Morrison studied at

Western Michigan University, but dropped out due to alcoholism and later lost custody of his child as a result of drunk driving. Like Bellar and Molitor, Morrison also engaged in political activism, including attending an April 30, 2020 “American Patriot” rally in front of Michigan’s Capitol building in Lansing carrying an assault rifle. The Wolverine Watchmen held training sessions at Morrison’s ranch in Jackson County, Michigan, which flaunted Confederate and Betsy Ross flags and was purchased with an inheritance ([deadlinedetroit.com](https://www.deadlinedetroit.com), October 9).

### **Militiamen, ‘Patriots’ and More Boogaloo**

Joseph Morrison’s Americana and Confederate paraphernalia is not uncommon among Wolverine Watchmen. For example, Shawn Fix, who was accused of hosting Wolverine Watchmen meetings and training sessions, also had an American flag and a “Don’t Tread on Me” flag on his front door when his home was raided ([freep.com](https://www.freep.com), October 12). Fix, who is from Belleville, Michigan, near Detroit, also surveilled Governor Whitmer’s vacation home, along with Eric Molitor and the twins, Michael and William Null ([conandaily.com](https://www.conandaily.com), October 11). A trucker with a record of drunk driving and assault, Fix was also a Donald Trump supporter, as evidenced by “Truckers 4 Trump” and “Honk 4 Trump” signs on his front lawn ([freep.com](https://www.freep.com), October 12).

Like Morrison and Fix, Barry Croft wore a colonial-style tricorn hat and posted on social media a photograph of 18th-century armed men, writing “Armed Citizens: The Original Homeland Security Since 1776” ([freep.com](https://www.freep.com), October 11). Croft is a self-employed trucker who was arrested for theft several times in the 1990s, for which he was pardoned in Delaware in 2019. He is the only non-Michigander among the Wolverine Watchmen. However, he was involved with the national Three Percenter

militia, whose emblems he displayed on his clothing and social media accounts. He attended a meeting in Ohio with Adam Fox to discuss “creating a society” that followed the U.S. Bill of Rights and was self-sufficient. This indicated Croft and Fox were influenced by Sovereign Citizens, who consider themselves free from legal constraints imposed by the U.S. government ([why.org](https://www.why.org), October 13).

Consistent with Boogaloo, Croft sought to attack police facilities and Adam Fox brought him into the Wolverine Watchmen to make explosives. Croft and Fox attended a Wisconsin militia training session before Fox told Croft about the plan to kidnap Governor Whitmer ([why.org](https://www.why.org), October 13). Croft’s tweets last Memorial Day also indicated his anti-government animus, derived from his belief that “every government official is responsible for the invasion of America by an estimated 35 million illegal foreign people” ([delawareonline.com](https://www.delawareonline.com), October 9).

Fox, for his part, lived in the basement of a vacuum cleaner repair shop in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which was raided by the FBI. Like Croft, he posted the Three Percenters emblem, alongside the phrase “Liberty or Death,” on social media ([clickondetroit.com](https://www.clickondetroit.com), October 9). The repair shop owner said he had known Fox since childhood and that Fox was in a militia, but he did not recall Fox being a white supremacist or seriously anti-government. However, he did say that Fox discussed Boogaloo, wore Boogaloo Hawaiian shirts, and told him that a battle would occur if the government ever took away gun rights ([woodtv.com](https://www.woodtv.com), October 8). Fox, who was an alcoholic and opposed wearing a COVID-19 mask, ultimately became motivated to kidnap Governor Whitmer not because of gun rights restrictions, but because he considered Whitmer a “tyrant bitc\*” whose COVID-19 restrictions meant “we need to do something” ([detroitnews.com](https://www.detroitnews.com), October 8; [freep.com](https://www.freep.com), October 11).

## From Boogaloo to Black Lives Matter and Beyond

Although Boogaloo and the Wolverine Watchmen have been described as “white supremacist,” they both are generally non-identitarian and primarily anti-government and anti-police ([Washington Post](#), October 8). One of the Wolverine Watchmen, Daniel Harris, even attended a Black Lives Matter rally in Lake Orion near Detroit last June and was interviewed by *Oakland County Times*. “It is a shame what happened with George Floyd and instances where law enforcement officers murder an unarmed man or woman who isn’t resisting arrest,” Harris told the newspaper. Further, he said that “riot police” were beating “protesters when they are there peacefully” and causing protesters to “lose their eyes” because of pepper spray ([oaklandcountytimes115.com](#), June 7).

Harris, like Paul Bellar and Joseph Morrison, served in the U.S. Marines. His service lasted from June 2015 to June 2019, and included a deployment to Japan. He joined the Wolverine Watchmen shortly after that. In one Wolverine Watchmen encrypted chat, Harris wrote: “Have one person go to [Governor Whitmer’s] house. Knock on the door and when she answers it just cap her...at this point. Fuc\* it” ([freep.com](#), October 11).

Another Wolverine Watchman who engaged Black Lives Matter was William Null, who worked with its demonstrators in Grand Rapids “to help keep the protest peaceful.” William, along with his twin brother, Michael Null, and Adam Fox, conducted nighttime surveillance of Governor Whitmer’s vacation home. William also attended the same April 30 rally as Joseph Morrison at the Michigan Capitol building in Lansing and another rally in Grand Rapids last May 18. During the latter, William, despite Boogaloo’s anti-police ideology, stood alongside

the city’s sheriff and rally-goers wearing military fatigues and holding pro-police flags ([wwmt.com](#), May 19). According to the sheriff, William brought bottled water to the Grand Rapids rally and distributed it to Black Lives Matters supporters. Like Morrison and Shawn Fix, William’s house also flaunted a “Don’t Tread on Me” flag. He also, like Croft, flew a Three Percenter flag ([wwmt.com](#), October 9).

William and his twin brother Michael were also recorded by Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) for its documentary, “Life and Liberty,” and the two invited the ABC journalists to a shooting range. [2] The journalists previously met the Nulls at the April 30 rally and again at a June rally at the Michigan Capitol building called “A Well-Regulated Militia,” which had an “anti-tyrant theme.” The journalists saw that the Null twins were members of the Michigan Liberty Militia—an organization that disavows racism and anti-Semitism and was formed after the 2014 Nevada “Bundy Standoff” incident—and learned that the Null twins opposed the destruction occurring at Black Lives Matter protests ([The New Yorker](#), August 17). However, the Null twins calmed tensions with Black Lives Matter protesters when the latter came near militiamen at the June rally ([abc.net.au](#), October 11).

Another member of the Wolverine Watchmen, Pete Musico, condemned “racism...because no one’s better than another.” Musico said the “enemies” were politicians who “rob us” and the government, which “overreaches,” including by fining drivers who do not wear seatbelts ([Twitter.com/robbystarbuck](#), October 9). Musico also warned about “Bill Gates’ vaccines” and said it would become mandatory to wear Gates’ “bracelets.” He also said he believed Donald Trump wanted the “middle class that built this country...to succeed” ([deadlinedetroit](#), October 9; [Daily Mail](#), October 9).

Musico and Morrison were considered Wolverine Watchmen founding members and required other members to train at Musico's Jackson County, Michigan property ([wwmt.com](http://wwmt.com), November 13). They also attended the June Michigan Capitol building rally along with the Null twins, Paul Bellar, Daniel Harris and Ty Garbin. The latter was an airline mechanic who used his boat to scout Governor Whitmer's vacation home at night and plotted to blow up a bridge to slow down a police rescue ([freep.com](http://freep.com), October 16).

Musico, who was charged in the 1990s with sexual assault and felony forgery, stated at a tactical training session last March that he once planned to throw a Molotov cocktail at the home of a police officer who pulled him over and gave him a ticket, but backed out at the last minute upon arriving at the officer's home ([wwmt.com](http://wwmt.com), November 13). Although Musico wore a 'Trump 2020' hat in a social media video post, he also said he was "tired of hearing this stuff about Trump...I'm sick of hearing about Donald Trump...why can't the government do what they're supposed to...see that hat [shows a 'Trump 2020' hat], it'll trigger a whole lot of people" ([Twitter/atrupar](https://twitter.com/atrupar), October 19).

Pete Musico, along with Brendan Caserta—another Wolverine Watchmen member, who was more anarchist-oriented than anyone else in the group—appear to have been the two Wolverine Watchmen most active on social media. Musico participated in a private Facebook group called "Boojahideen." This term mixes Boogaloo with "mujahideen" and indicates the former's social meme culture and sympathy for jihadists' combat against the U.S. government ([wwmt.com](http://wwmt.com), November 13). In another sign of Boogaloo adherents' sympathies towards jihadists, a Boogaloo cell collaborated with an FBI informant who claimed to be a member of Hamas ([justice.gov](http://justice.gov), September 4).

Meanwhile, Caserta's activity on social media involved posting videos from his home, where an anarchist flag could be seen on a wall in the background. He also stated police were "order followers" who are "not here to protect you" ([Twitter/robbystarbucks](https://twitter.com/robbystarbucks), October 9). He further represented the synthesis of Boogaloo and anarchism by wearing Hawaiian shirts, but praising the Declaration of Independence as an "anarchist document" ([Dailymail](http://dailymail.com), October 9). Caserta was also among the Wolverine Watchmen seen in video footage released by the U.S. attorney's office and originally taken by an FBI informant who infiltrated the militia. Caserta promised that "if this shi\* goes down, I'm taking out as many mother fuc\*ers" as I can," because "I am sick of being robbed by the state" ([tmz.com](http://tmz.com), October 17).

## Conclusion

In planning to kidnap a state governor, the Wolverine Watchmen envisioned a dramatic operation unlike any other in modern U.S. history. Although the militiamen scouted Governor Whitmer's vacation home, trained and were armed, it remains unknown whether - and probably unlikely that - they would have been able to pull it off, let alone even attempt to carry it out. At the very least, they were LARPing (Live Action Role-Playing) their grand plans to revolt against the United States and Michigan state government. Nevertheless, their active social media presence, public roles at rallies throughout Michigan, wide web of journalist and militia contacts, and loud mouths made it fairly easy for the U.S. government to monitor and infiltrate their militia. Their anti-government ideology was also well-known, and amid a pandemic and lockdown and with significant arms at their disposal, they took some serious steps toward actually conducting an attack. The U.S. government took no risks, defended itself, and the Wolverine Watchmen are now all facing long prison sentences.

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## Notes

[1] See <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=Boogaloo&geo=US>

[2] See <https://iview.abc.net.au/video/NC2026H024S00>

## Post-Mortem Analysis: Izzat al-Douri and the State of Iraq's Ba'ath Party

*Rami Jameel*

On October 25, the Iraqi Ba'ath party of the former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein announced the death of its leader, Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri. Almost no details were given about the circumstances surrounding the death of al-Douri, who was 78, but the announcement implied that he died of natural causes (Al Quds, October 26).

Al-Douri was the leader of the banned Iraqi Ba'ath party and a coalition of insurgent groups affiliated with it. His whereabouts had been unknown since he went into hiding after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 and he became a wanted man by coalition forces and later the post-Hussein Iraqi governments. The United States placed a \$10 million bounty on his head. He was the king of clubs in the infamous deck of cards that the U.S. forces issued at the time of the invasion for the most wanted figures in the Saddam Hussein government (Al Jazeera, October 26).

### The Man Who Died Too Many Times

Al-Douri was born in the town of al-Dawr in the predominately Sunni province of Salaheddin in 1942, not far from where his former leader Saddam Hussein was born five years earlier. He was the deputy chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council and deputy commander of the Iraqi armed forces.

Since the fall of the Ba'ath government in 2003, several false reports on the death of al-Douri have emerged. That so many of these announcements were ultimately false was astonishing to many, as Hussein's number two

was believed to be the most vulnerable senior member of the toppled government, and was not expected to survive in hiding for as long as he did ([Arabi21](#), October 21).

Al-Douri was ill and reportedly had leukemia, needing blood transfer operations regularly. He also had a recognizable voice and accent along with red hair, which should have made it difficult for him to hide ([El Watan News](#), April 18, 2015).

Therefore, it was surprising for many that he evaded the destiny of most of the wanted leaders of the Ba'ath government, who were captured or killed during and after the invasion. Many even suspected that he was dead, considering the immense pressure that his banned party came under. One of the frequent occurrences in post-2003 Iraq were new reports and announcements of al-Douri's death. Some of those announcements were issued by Iraqi officials. But none of them were proven. One Arab publication counted 15 reports of al-Douri's death ([Al Araby](#), October 26).

Al-Douri was alive and in recent years he even appeared in video messages filmed from his hiding places. Some analysts suggested that he was living outside Iraq, hosted by an Arab government. Others contended that he was with his old enemies the Kurds in the autonomous region of Kurdistan in northern Iraq, but that was denied by the Kurdish regional government. [1]

The Iraqi government, and the U.S. forces when they were in Iraq, came under pressure due to the fact that they were seemingly unable to capture such a high-profile figure from the Hussein regime. His survival always left the door open for certain groups to exaggerate the Ba'ath party's role in the insurgency and engage in misguided speculation about an alliance or even merger between the Ba'ath and jihadists groups.

## Faith and Jihad

Al-Douri was the central figure to the issue of relations between the Ba'ath party and jihadist groups in post-2003 Iraq. Analyzing his life before and after the invasion clearly shows the difference between his idea of political violence—which belongs to the postcolonial struggle embraced by nationalist movements and governments in the Muslim world—and that of global jihadists. The latter believe in fully-fledged religious wars against non-Muslim powers, particularly the United States. Despite his emphasis on jihadism during his insurgency years, and even before 2003, his ideology rested on both pan-Arab and Iraqi nationalism. The jihad he waged against the U.S.-led coalition is different than that waged by the fundamentalist Sunni group Islamic State (IS). His aim was to restore a nation-state that was ruled by his party while IS intended to establish an ever-expanding Islamic state that considered all existing leaders in the Middle East, including al-Douri and his Ba'ath party, to be apostates.

He tried to influence IS and other insurgent groups to his cause. He notably even hailed IS when it took over Mosul and other parts of Iraq in 2014 ([Al-Sharq](#), July 13, 2014). That move, however, should be read in the context of the desperate situation al-Douri had been in since 2003. He was under pressure from superior powers, especially the United States and Iran, who both supported the Iraqi Shia-led government. No other Sunni insurgent group managed to achieve anything close to IS' advances in 2014. He seemed to be trying to exploit the group's early success. But, he soon saw that IS was never going to coexist with any other group, let alone his secular Ba'ath party. IS executed senior members of the Ba'ath in occupied areas and al-Douri eventually condemned them. Al-Douri ultimately described IS as being as bad as his other enemies—the Iranian and Iraqi Shia parties—describing both

sides as conspirators meaning harm to Islam and Arabs (Independent Arabia, October 20).

Al-Douri went further in 2017, rejecting any notion that Ba'athist military officers were fighting for IS and considered such insinuations an insult to his party and the former Iraqi Army (Arabi21, May 16, 2017). Al-Douri's claim that officers from the former Iraqi Army did not fight with IS was not accurate. IS included officers from the former army, especially when Iraqis dominated its leadership after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became leader in 2010. However, none of those officers were prominent figures before 2003 and none of the them were truly Ba'athist. Those who were members of the Ba'ath party had to condemn their former party's secular pan-Arab ideology and embraced the Salafi-jihadism of IS. [2]

Notably, IS and its predecessor al-Qaeda in Iraq condemned al-Douri, his leader Saddam Hussein, and their Ba'ath party as *kafir* (non-believers) because of their Ba'ath party's secular ideology. Al-Douri's praise for IS was part of his attempt to create a bigger space for his party to operate in, but that was doomed to fail as IS would never allow any other rival group to operate under its rule.

### **Leading an Insurgency**

Al-Douri was a well-known Sufi. When the Ba'ath party was in power, he provided support to various Sufi orders. That network of relations he had built might explain how he amazingly survived the hostile environment Iraq had become for him and his party. Al-Douri's faith provided him with more than the refuge and the ability to operate underground effectively, it was also the base of the main Ba'ath affiliated insurgent group. On December 30, 2006 Saddam Hussein was executed and al-Douri was promptly announced to have been elevated to

become the leader of the party (Al-Watan Voice, June 22, 2017).

Shortly after his promotion, he formed the Jaish Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshabandia (Army of the Men of the Naqshabandia—JRTN). He also formed a supposedly large coalition of insurgent groups called Jabhat al-Jihad wa al-Tahreer (The Jihad and Liberation Front—JLF), but only the JRTN proved to have a noticeable impact and presence on the ground in the following years (Al Quds, October 6, 2007).

The ideology of JRTN and JLF was a clear reflection of that of al-Douri's himself—a combination of Islamism, pan-Arabism, and Iraqi nationalism. The insurgency was ineffective, but its continued survival, and that of its leader al-Douri, has always been significant. Several Iraqi Islamist insurgent groups, which were more powerful than the Ba'ath party after 2003, have seen their appeal and power fading for several reasons, but the JRTN has remained active.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which became the Islamic State after expanding to Syria, eventually grew to dominate the local Sunni insurgency. It eclipsed all other Sunni groups. One of the main features of the decline of the other Sunni insurgent groups was their lack of known and popular leadership. Despite its weakness compared to IS, the Ba'ath and its JRTN and JLF remained under the firm control of al-Douri. [3]

### **Addresses and Policies**

The withdrawal of the U.S. forces left al-Douri with new opportunities. As local Sunni resentments were increasing against the Shia-led government in Baghdad, he started to release video messages on certain occasions that were observed during the party's long rule. Some of those included only traditional Ba'athist rhetoric,



but others showed some attempts to adapt to new realities and ceasing on new trends. During the upheaval that struck several Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa, al-Douri appealed to Iraqi people. When Saudi Arabia took a clear anti-Iran position under the leadership of crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, al-Douri also tried to join the bandwagon, declaring that he supported the new policy ([Raialyoum](#), April 7, 2018).

More recently, he made his most striking statement when he apologized to Kuwait and the Kuwaiti people for the Iraqi invasion and annexation of the country in 1990-1991 ([Ammon News](#), April 14, 2019).

His statements attempted to reclaim the position Iraq assumed during the 1980s as the main force confronting Iran in defense of other Arab Gulf countries. These attempts were desperate, but many in the Arab world miss Iraq's geopolitical role, which ended when it invaded Kuwait in 1990.

## Conclusion

Since rising to lead the Ba'ath Party, al-Douri used a modest tone in his rhetoric and showed willingness to work with other parties. He made his first video appearance in 2012, where he tried to appeal to ongoing public protests in the Sunni areas of western Iraq. But those were eventually crushed by the Shia-led government and IS advances followed. He also tried to appeal to the more recent street protests, which broke out in Baghdad and the predominantly Shia areas of southern Iraq in October 2019. Neither of his attempts were successful, but the political space he was trying to exploit is noteworthy. The Sunni community in Iraq suffered dearly after the fall of Saddam Hussein's secular, but Sunni-led government. In recent years, however, there has been an increasing trend—even in the Shia areas—of rejecting the

blanket condemnation of Ba'ath rule and emphasizing its effectiveness in providing security, public order, and a safety net for the poor ([Erem News](#), April 11, 2016).

The problem with al-Douri was not his past affiliation with the Saddam Hussein government, but his inability to rebrand the party. He could not polish the old brand and make it appealing for a new generation. But he succeeded in maintaining a distinct presence for the party in spite of immense pressure against its activities. The Ba'ath were banned and its members persecuted by both the Iraqi government and IS. Al-Douri also survived challenges from within the ranks of the party. The main challenge to his leadership came when General Muhammad Younis al-Ahmad attempted to become the leader of the party and formed a new leadership body ([Al-Watan Voice](#), January 23, 2007).

Al-Ahmad was a member of the supreme Ba'ath leadership before 2003 and enjoyed something al-Douri could not secure—the support of a regional government. The Syrian regime provided support and refuge for al-Ahmad's group, but after years of rivalry, al-Douri proved to clearly have more clout and a better claim to leadership of the Ba'ath ([Al Jazeera](#), November 27, 2010).

The story of al-Douri was not a story of effectiveness, but survival. It was under the most challenging circumstances that he managed to stay alive. The Iraqi government is supported by the United States and the regional power, Iran. However, talk shows and social media conversations increasingly suggest that the possibility of a fall of the whole system of government in Iraq is not to be ruled out ([Baghdad Today](#), December 23).

Only weeks before his death, a senior Iraqi Shia politician warned of an imminent coup led by al-Douri ([Al Quds](#), October 4). The Ba'ath and al-

Douri have been used frequently as a source of fearmongering by the government since 2003, and the Iraqi ruling class's worst nightmare is a scenario of a return of the Ba'ath party to power. Al-Douri had been a symbol of that nightmare. His lack of charisma and wit made him unsuitable for such a dramatic takeover, but his ability to survive and keep the Ba'athist dream alive was notable. New leadership might be more suitable for such an audacious maneuver, though it remains unlikely due to the Iraqi government's continued support from the United States and Iran.

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## Notes

[1] After the 2003 invasion, the Kurds showed significantly more tolerance toward the elderly leaders of the Ba'ath government and gave them asylum. Yet that was mostly provided to those who needed protection and were not officially accused of crimes. All of those who went to Kurdistan avoided public appearances and involvement in politics. But Shia parties frequently accused the exiled Ba'athists of conspiring and coordinating acts of violence against Iraqi forces in the Arab part of Iraq.

[2] For a good treatment of the claim that Ba'athists fought for IS see *Fawaz Gerges, "Baathists and ISIS Jihadists: Who converted whom?" In "ISIS a History" pp.144,169. Princeton University Press. 2016.*

[3] See the JRTN ecology of al-Douri on the groups website published on October 25. <https://alnakshabandia.net/army/statements-and-declarations/army-statements/4736/>

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