

MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

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Hamid al-Jazaeri: Arrest Completes the Saraya al-Khorasani Commander's Fall From Grace

John Foulkes

On December 13, forces associated with the Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organization Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) raided the headquarters of Saraya al-Khorasani, a militia that until recently was affiliated with the PMU. Several of the group's leaders were arrested, including its deputy secretary-general and military commander, Hamid al-Jazaeri ([The National](#), December 19, 2020). Al-Jazaeri has been a prominent militia leader in Iraq since the rise of the Islamic State, and has long maintained substantial contacts with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF). His arrest follows a months-long decline in standing within the PMU, which followed his role in suppressing a widespread protest movement that began in October 2019 and larger attempts by Baghdad to rein in the PMU militias.

Al-Jazaeri, who is believed to be in his late 40s or early 50s, is from the area around the city of Basra. A longtime insurgent, al-Jazaeri is believed to have spent much of the 1990s exiled in Iran, from where he regularly infiltrated into Iraq to conduct operations against the government of Saddam Hussein (see [MLM](#), August 2, 2016). From exile in 1995, al-Jazaeri and Seyed Ali al-Yaseri, the future secretary-general of Saraya al-Khorasani, founded Hizb al-Tali'a al-Islamiyya (Islamic Vanguard Party). This party would be officially established in Iraq following the overthrow of the Hussein government in 2003 by U.S.-led coalition forces ([francesoir.fr](#), June 3, 2017).

The formation of Saraya al-Khorasani was announced on September 2013. Like many other Shia militias, al-Jazaeri and al-Yaseri were motivated to serve the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei by defending the Bashir al-Assad regime and protecting the Sayyida Zaynab shrine, a Shia holy site located in Damascus. Saraya al-Khorasani forces reportedly fought rebel factions near the shrine

and in rural areas around Damascus ([Jihadology](#), October 29, 2013).

The militia quickly shifted back to Iraq following Islamic State's (IS) rapid seizure of territory in early 2014. Saraya al-Khorasani fighters participated in breaking IS' siege on Amerli, in northeastern Iraq, and were recorded taking part in fighting in Diyala, Salah ad Din, Anbar and Kirkuk provinces. The militia was accused of human rights violations while operating in Diyala and Salah ad Din, ransacking and burning down Sunni villages ([Human Rights Watch](#), November 4, 2014; [Human Rights Watch](#), March 18, 2015).

Al-Jazaeri and Saraya al-Khorasani are intimately connected to the IRGC-QF. Al-Jazaeri had close connections to the IRGC-QF General Hamid Taghavi, who was advising Saraya al-Khorasani when he was killed by IS fighters outside Samarra in December 2014 ([al-Monitor](#), January 11, 2015). Al-Jazaeri was also photographed with the late Qasem Soleimani, the former IRGC-QF commander. Al-Jazaeri, as military commander of the militia, was believed to have worked closely with Soleimani and facilitated his connections to other PMU militias, before Soleimani's death in a U.S. airstrike in January 2020 ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), December 15, 2020). The militia was reportedly given substantial monetary support and arms from Iran, and has advocated for the establishment in Iraq of *wilayat al-faqih* (rule of the Islamic jurisprudence), the form of government followed by Iran (see [MLM](#), August 2, 2016).

In October 2019, widespread demonstrations broke out in the Shia majority areas of central and southern Iraq to protest corruption, lack of opportunities, inefficient government services,

the post-2003 political system, and more. Tehran saw the protests as part of a larger conspiracy to displace Iranian influence in the country ([Arabi21](#), October 30, 2019). PMU militias, with Iranian approval, were at the forefront of the violent crackdown on protestors. The PMU crackdown operations were led by Abu Zainab al-Lami, with al-Jazaeri providing on-the-ground tactical oversight in Baghdad (see [MLM](#), December 3, 2019; [TRT World](#), October 25, 2020; [Asharq al-Awsat](#), December 15, 2020). [1] Al-Jazaeri reportedly coordinated Saraya al-Khorasani fighters who were involved in shutting down six Baghdad TV stations that were broadcasting footage of the protests ([U.S. State Department](#), October 2019). Al-Jazaeri has also been accused of leading a team of snipers who killed demonstrators in Baghdad's Tahrir Square in October 2019 ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), December 15, 2020).

Since committing these human rights abuses, al-Jazaeri has experienced a fall from grace within the PMU. In May 2020, reports indicated that Faleh al-Fayyad, the chairman of the PMU, announced that al-Jazaeri would be relieved of his command within the umbrella organization ([The Arab Weekly](#), May 24, 2020; [Asharq al-Awsat](#), December 15, 2020). Al-Jazaeri's influence within Saraya al-Khorasani was maintained, but it signaled that the group was falling out of favor. Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi has been attempting to limit the influence of the PMU since he entered office in May 2020, with limited success. Kadhimi ordered a raid of a warehouse operated by Kata'ib Hezbollah—a prominent Iranian-linked PMU militia—resulting in the arrest of 14. They were all released, however, following pressure from the militias ([Tasnim News Agency](#), June 26, 2020).

The recent arrests of al-Jazaeri, al-Yaseri and over a dozen members of Saraya al-Khorasani were reportedly made with Iran's approval. Notably, the arrests were carried out by the PMU security forces, with al-Jazaeri and al-Yaseri being charged with corruption. The move is allegedly the first step in the process of dismantling the militia, which is reportedly being overseen by PMU Chief of Staff Abdul Aziz al-Muhammadawi, a.k.a. Abu Fadak. [2] Moreover, the move had the approval of the other PMU factions and the Iraqi government ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), December 15, 2020).

[2] To read more on Abdul Aziz al-Muhammadawi, see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), September 3, 2020.

Al-Jazaeri's arrest is a result of several ongoing trends, including Prime Minister Kadhimi's efforts to rein in the PMU, the ongoing protest movement in Iraq and rising resentment in Iraq against the militias. Al-Jazaeri, in his role as military commander of Saraya al-Khorasani, was responsible for significant human rights abuses during the war against IS and the subsequent occupation of Sunni-majority areas of Iraq. The militia has also gained a bad reputation at the local level for corruption and embezzlement of businesses. The arrest of al-Jazaeri and the Saraya al-Khorasani leadership is an attempt by the PMU to clean up its own image in attempt to become a more legitimate organization to the Iraqi people and an international audience.

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Notes

[1] See [CTC](#), Volume 13, Issue 1, January 2020.

Mentor, Provocateur or Mastermind? Understanding Naufar Moulavi's Role in Sri Lanka's Easter Sunday Attack

Animesh Roul

In early January 2021, the U.S. Department of Justice announced that three foreign nationals – Muhammed Naufar (also, Naufar Moulavi), Muhammed Riskan and Ahamed Milhan – had been charged with conspiring to provide material support to Islamic State (IS), a designated foreign terrorist organization that claimed responsibility for the deadly April 2019 Easter Sunday violence in Sri Lanka (U.S. Department of Justice, January 8). Naufar Moulavi is one of the founding members of the IS-linked National Towheed Jamaat (NTJ). This local Salafi-jihadist group carried out the bombings at eight locations in Sri Lanka that day, including major churches and luxury hotels. The attacks claimed nearly 270 lives and injured more than 500 people, including foreign nationals, women and children. The NTJ's Muhammad Zahran led the team of suicide bombers from a splinter group known as Jammiyat-ul Millathu Ibrahim (JMI), which carried out the mayhem.

Some observers asked why Zahran, one of the founding leaders of the IS-linked NTJ, chose to die as a suicide bomber. Though the answer remains elusive, it is generally assumed that he may not have been the mastermind who inspired the group to carry out the attacks. As investigations into the attacks continued, information surfaced about the possible role of Naufar Moulavi, a brother-in-law and mentor of Zahran and spiritual head of the NTJ. [1] In late July 2020, Nilantha Jayawardena, the former director of the Sri Lanka's State Intelligence Service (SIS), who was initially involved in the investigation, revealed to the Presidential

Commission of Inquiry (PCoI) probing the Easter Sunday attacks that the mastermind of the suicide bombings was not Zahran, but his mentor Muhammed Naufar, the NTJ's spiritual leader (Newsfirst, July 28, 2020; Mawbima, September 15, 2020).

Naufar Moulavi has been in police custody since his arrest in May 2019, a fortnight after the deadly bombings. A special unit of Sri Lankan police arrested him at a safe house in Dambulla town in Central Province (News First, May 07, 2019). In mid-September 2020, he was interrogated by the Police Unit of the Commission (PCoI) for about six hours (Ceylon Today, December 3, 2020). While his interrogation reports have not been made public, information about him and his role as NTJ spiritual head of could come out when the PCoI furnishes its report to the country's president in late January 2021. Thus far, however, the information available has corroborated his close connection to the Easter Sunday attacks and close association with Muhamad Zaharan.

Naufar Moulavi took over the reins of the NTJ following the death of Muhammed Zaharan, who detonated his suicide vest at the Shangri-La Hotel on April 21, 2019. Police sources confirmed Moulavi had been living abroad in Qatar for several years and frequently returned to Sri Lanka. The relationship between Naufar Moulavi and Zaharan can be traced back to the early 2000s. According to Muhammed Zahilan, secretary of a Sufi Muslim group in the Kattankudy area, where the NTJ originated, Naufar Moulavi mentored Zaharan and was responsible for his study at an Arab school that teaches "Wahhabism" in Kurunegala, in Sri Lanka's North Western Province (Ceylon Today, June 20, 2020).

Information gathered from Abdul Razik, leader of another radical Islamist group, Sri

Lanka Towheed Jamaath (SLTJ), suggested that in 2006, Naufar Moulavi and Zaharan founded the Dhar-ul Athar (Abode of Islamic Tradition) organization in Kattankudy. They started preaching extremist ideology and enticed youths toward extremism ([NewsFirst](#), May 1, 2019). However, after a few years, due to internal conflicts, Zaharan was expelled and founded the National Thowheed Jamaat (NTJ) in 2012. Around 2016, the NTJ and its leadership (Zaharan and Naufar Moulavi) became attracted to Islamic State's violent ideals. Zaharan's association with Naufar Moulavi continued within the NTJ, though differences cropped up due to Zaharan's favoritism toward his family members, especially his brothers and fellow jihadists Muhammed Rilwan and Muhammed Zaini. Despite these occasional differences, Naufar Moulavi, a teacher and mentor to Zaharan, remained his deputy. However, his role within the NTJ was primarily focused on preaching, recruitment and training. He was in charge of spreading NTJ views inside Sri Lanka. In February 2019, supporters of Naufar Moulavi protested against Zaharan for his partisan (pro-family) orientation and soon a tug of war erupted for the NTJ's leadership. This infighting remained internal, and nothing came out publicly to prove that Naufar Moulavi and Zaharan had separated. Evidence of their intact relationship came to light when Sri Lankan police arrested Naufar Moulavi's 16-year-old son, Muhammed Naufar (*nom de guerre* Abu Hasam), from Ampara town, located in the Eastern Province. Muhammed Naufar confessed he had received arms training along with Zaharan Hashim and others at the NTJ's Nuwara-Eliya Jihadist Training Camp. He was taken to the camp by his father to receive Islamic education and jihadist training ([Ada Derana](#), August 16, 2019).

The interrogation of several other suspects suggested that the Easter Sunday attack plot was

kept secret, with even senior NTJ members being unaware of the jihadist conspiracy. However, SIS, citing witness accounts, said that, along with those who took part in the attacks, Abdul Cader Fathima Hadiya (Zaharan's wife), Sarah Jasmine (wife of the Katuwapitiya Church suicide bomber, Mohammad Hasthoon) and Naufar Moulavi had prior knowledge of the Easter Sunday suicide bombings ([Daily Mirror](#), July 24, 2020).

In planning the Easter Sunday attacks, NTJ operatives met with Naufar Moulavi and deliberated over several proposals for the violence. Naufar Moulavi and his followers inside the NTJ, including the head of the group's armed wing, Ahmad Millan, proposed a series of synchronized suicide bombings targeting nine provinces in Sri Lanka. However, Zaharan disagreed with this plan and went ahead with his plot to target Catholic churches and luxury hotels in Colombo and Batticaloa ([Daily Mirror](#), July 3, 2019; [Newshub](#) June 25, 2019).

Naufar Moulavi, along with another Islamist leader, Imaam Muhammed Imaath Fakir, is a major missing link between Zaharan and his IS handlers in Syria. Scant open-source information exists about Imaath Fakir, a Syrian war returnee arrested in Dehiwala in May 2019 ([NewsFirst](#), May 1, 2019). In contrast, Naufar Moulavi's position within the NTJ and his influence over the suicide bombers, including Zaharan, is to a certain extent perceivable. However, it remains to be seen whether his role either as provocateur or the mastermind behind the Easter Sunday attacks will be proven when the PCoI report comes out in late January 2021.

The PCoI submitted its report to Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa on February 1 ([Daily News](#), February 1). This much-awaited report, not yet made public, is supposed to reveal several factors that led to the carnage, including

the jihadist networks, external logistical and operational linkages, and support system. While Naufar Moulavi's role as NTJ propagandist, influencer and recruiter is proven, it remains to be seen whether his role as either a jihadist provocateur or mastermind behind Sri Lanka's worst-ever terrorist violence comes to light.

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Notes

[1] NTJ Leader identified!" Sri Lanka Mirror, June 25, 2019, <https://www.srilankamirror.com/news/14594-ntj-leader-identified>

Maalim Ayman: Al-Shabaab Commander Steering a Deadly Special Unit in East Africa

Sunguta West

A Kenyan-U.S. military camp in Manda Bay, Lamu County in the coastal region came under heavy attack from armed militants on January 5, 2020.

Three Americans were killed in the raid, for which al-Shabaab – the Somali-based al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa – claimed responsibility. The camp is used by both Kenyan and American forces ([Nairobi News](#), January 6, 2020).

It later emerged that Jaysh al-Ayman, a specialized unit of the organization that carries out terrorist attacks in both Kenya and Somalia, had executed the raid. From al-Shabaab bases in Somalia, Maalim Ayman, the unit's commander, had instructed and helped prepare for the operation ([The East African](#), November 18, 2020).

The raid added to the growing list of deadly attacks executed by the special unit under the direction of Ayman.

Who is Maalim Ayman?

Within al-Shabaab, Ayman can be described as a mid-level commander. In the terrorist organization's operations and intelligence circles, the militant leader is known by several aliases, including Abdiaziz Dobow Ali, Ma'alim Ayman, Mo'alim Ayman, Nuh Ibrahim Abdi and Ayman Kabo. The unit also carries several names, including Jaysh Ayman al-Shabaab, Jaysh la

Imani and Jaysh Ayman Majmo Ayman ([Nation](#), November 27, 2020).

Ayman's exact date of birth is unknown, but he is believed to be in his late 40s, like most of the mid-level commanders within al-Shabaab. Reports suggest he was born in 1973 in Kenya's Mandera County, a predominantly Muslim region that maintains close links with Somalia. In the border region, people have relatives in both countries, so for him, traveling to war-torn Somalia to join al-Shabaab was not a difficult affair.

When Ayman was approximately 33-years-old, the militant leader is believed to have been among the first group of Kenyans fighters to have traveled to Somalia between 2006- 2007 to join the Islamist resistance against the then-Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The TFG came into power in 2007 after overthrowing the Islamic Courts Union, a group of Muslims courts that in 2006 filled the power vacuum left by the fall of the Dictator Siad Barre's government in 1991.

Fighters like Ayman were sent for training in Majimmo in southern Somalia. The area had been set up for training East African mujahedeen by a militant leader known as Titus Nabiswa, a.k.a. Mwalimu Khalid or Mwalimu Kenya.

Nabiswa's forces reportedly under-performed, only succeeding in executing low-level grenade strikes against churches, public installations and security forces. The attacks were concentrated in Mombasa, Nairobi and Garissa cities.

When he was killed in Mombasa in an alleged shootout in October 2012, the emir of al-Shabaab, the late Shaykh Ahmed Abdi Godane, a.k.a. Mukhar Abu Zubeir, moved to strengthen

the focus on the wider East African region. He ordered the formation of a new and more effective unit to target the East Africa region ([Nation](#), November 27, 2020).

That created a chance for Ayman to ascend the ranks of al-Shabaab. In 2013, when the unit took shape, Godane named it after Ayman, who was one of the founding commanders. Godane allegedly was uncomfortable with a foreigner leading the unit, so he nominated Ayman, a Somali, to lead the force ([Nation](#), November 27, 2020; [Nairobi News](#), September 6, 2017).

Ayman, an ethnic Somali from Mandera County in Kenya, has been commanding the special force since its founding.

Under Ayman, the seven-year-old unit can be described as deadly and violent. In an attempt to seize control of the largely Muslim coastal and northeastern regions of Kenya, the unit has adopted a bloody approach, executing revenge attacks, assassinations and beheadings. It carries out tit-for-tat operations, attempting to kill at least two or more security forces for every one of its fighters who are killed ([Nation](#), November 27, 2020).

Large-scale strikes by the group have targeted churches, hotels and security installations. Jaysh al-Ayman has filmed these attacks for use in al-Shabaab's propaganda war. The units have also tried preaching to the people, using videos of the mass attacks to recruit new followers.

On June 14, 2014, under his watch, the unit carried out a deadly attack on a hotel in Mpeketoni area in Lamu County. At least 40 people were killed. In July the same year, the unit attacked a trading center and targeted government buildings and a church, killing at

least nine people. Among the dead were people watching a World Cup football match.

Ayman's unit, in July 2014, raided Gamba police station in Lamu, killing at least 29 people. On June 2015, the unit raided a Kenya Defense Forces base in Lamu, killing two soldiers. Ayman's unit was also involved in the deadly 2013 Nairobi Westgate attack, during which 67 people were killed and over 200 injured.

In April 2015, the unit executed the Garissa University attack, which left 148 people dead, most of them Christian students. This was the deadliest attack in the country since the 1998 U.S. embassy bombing.

That same month, the unit was repulsed after it attempted to overrun an army base in Lamu. Reports indicate that 11 KDF soldiers and 16 members of unit were killed during the attack.

In 2017, Jaysh al-Ayman abducted Kenya's Permanent Secretary (PS) Mariaam El- Maawy on the Mokowe-Mpeketoni road as she went to inspect development projects. The PS was rescued by Kenyan Special forces, but she later died while receiving treatment in South Africa.

The deaths associated with the unit have boosted Ayman's status with al-Shabaab and its leadership. The U.S. designated Ayman as a global terrorist on November 17, 2020, alongside Abdullahi Osman Mohammed. While the designation exposes and isolates Ayman and denies him access to the U.S. financial system, it has also boosted his terrorist credentials ([The Star](#), November 17, 2020).

Ayman was reportedly killed in 2019 in a Kenyan airstrike in the southern Somali town of Jamame. The strike targeted a ceremony in which new al-Shabaab recruits were joining the

unit. But the recent U.S. terrorist designation clarifies that he is still alive ([Nation](#), November 27, 2020).

Ayman's group includes foreign terrorists, among them a German known as Ahmed Muller, who uses the aliases Andreas Ahmed Khalid, Muller Martin Muller and Abu Naisabah. Malik Ali Jones, an American now serving a prison term in the United States, was also involved with Jaysh al-Ayman. The group includes other fighters from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania ([Nation](#), August 21, 2020; [Eritrea Focus](#), February 5, 2019).

Maalim Ayman remains at large in southern Somalia. A beneficiary of Shaykh Godane's trust, Ayman is proving to be an asset to al-Shabaab. His organizational skills made Jaysh al-Ayman visible and turned the shadowy unit into a deadly force in East Africa.

With his status as a terrorist boosted by the U.S. designation, it is possible that the group will conduct more attacks. In Kenya, security forces continue to focus on such leaders. However, in Somalia, officials are distracted as the country prepares to elect a new president. It would be a deadly mistake for international security services to lose their focus on the deadly Jaysh al-Ayman commander.

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The Mysterious Case of Shaikh Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost – The Founder of ISKP

Abdul Sayed

On November 14, the spokesman for the Pakistan Army in a joint press conference with the Pakistani foreign minister accused an Afghan national, Shaikh Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, of organizing a group of fighters affiliated with Islamic State Khurasan Province (IS-K) for the purposes of conducting terrorism in Pakistan. The spokesman accused Muslim Dost of doing so with support from the Indian government ([Geo News](#), November 14, 2020). The Pakistani state has often accused Indian spy agencies of covertly supporting anti-state Islamist militants and Baloch separatists operating from Afghan soil. But this is the first time they have charged an important figure of the post-9/11 Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) jihadist landscape of assisting Indian plans to destabilize Pakistan.

Muslim Dost quickly released a statement denying the Pakistani government charges ([Taand](#), November 18, 2020). His statement provided a new glimpse into his beliefs, as an Afghan nationalist and severe critic of the Pakistani state.

Muslim Dost has remained a spiritual mentor to the senior leadership of the militant group Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), particularly to its second emir, Hakim Ullah Mehsud [1]. He emerged internationally as an important actor on the Af-Pak jihadist landscape after his influential role in founding the IS-K in 2014 ([Nawai Waqt](#), November 14, 2014.) Muslim Dost is also a well-known religious figure of Afghanistan's Salafist community and Pakistan's

Pashtun belt. In addition, he is a famous poet and writer, having authored dozens of books and remained imprisoned in the U.S. Guantanamo Bay detention camp on charges of alleged ties with al-Qaeda ([Archives](#), July 10, 2014). This article aims to analyze Muslim Dost through his leading roles in the Islamist militancy in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Who is Muslim Dost?

Muslim Dost was born in 1958 in the Kot district of Nangarhar province, Afghanistan. He migrated to Peshawar, Pakistan, in 1973 after the military coup led by Mohammed Daud Khan overthrew the Afghan King Zahir Shah ([Archives](#), July 10, 2014). Afghan Islamists fled the country after the coup, fearing persecution at the hands of their political rivals—the Khalq and Parcham factions of the Communist party in Afghanistan. The latter played a central role in the coup. [2]

Dost joined the Islamic Party of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar (HIG) and then switched to Jumat-ul-Dawa lil-Quran wal-Sunnah (JDLQWS), the first Salafist party in Afghanistan, established by Shaikh Jamil-ur-Rehman in 1980. [3] He became head of the cultural wing of JDLQWS and editor of its Arabic periodical. [4]

After the killing of Shaikh Jamil, Dost had severe differences with influential leaders of the party and Shaikh Jami's nephews, as a result of which he quit JDLQWS in the early 1990s. [5] During this period, he served as a teacher in the Salafist religious seminaries in Peshawar and ran multiple businesses, including a gemstone store. [6]

Muslim Dost was among the 800 individuals the Pakistani government arrested after 9/11 and handed to the U.S. for their alleged ties with al-Qaeda. [7] After spending three years at Guantanamo, the U.S. authorities handed him over to the Afghan government. [8] They assessed him as posing a negligible threat to the U.S. ([The Nation](#), Feb 27, 2017). After his release, Dost went from Kabul directly to Peshawar, Pakistan, where his family was still living. [9]

Dost became popular in the Af-Pak jihadist landscape when he published a book – *The Broken Shackles of Guantanamo* – narrating his prison experience. [10] The book intensely criticized Pakistan's spy agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and the nephews of Shaikh Jamil. He alleged that Shaikh Jamil's nephews used their connections in ISI to send him to Guantanamo Bay on false charges of links to al-Qaeda. The Pakistani security agencies arrested him shortly after he published his prison memoirs. Later, the TTP obtained his release in a prisoner's swap with the Pakistani army at the beginning of 2009 ([Taand](#), November 18, 2020).

TTP shifted Dost to its stronghold in Pakistan's Orakzay agency. There, Dost remained close to Hakeem Ullah Mehsud, an influential TTP commander who later became its second emir. [11] Rifat Ullah Orakzay, a senior Pakistani journalist hailing from Orakzay agency, who has covered TTP since its start, says Dost served as a spiritual mentor of Mehsud until the latter's killing, but Orakzay says there is no proof of Dost's direct involvement in terrorism in Pakistan. [12]

The current chief of TTP, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, writes in his book that Dost presided

over a high-level TTP *Shura* (council) meeting held in the Orakzay agency in August 2009. [13] The meeting chose Hakeem Ullah as the second emir of TTP. He succeeded the group's founder, Bait Ullah Mehsud, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike on August 5, 2009.

Dost denies any connections to al-Qaeda but Tahir Khan, a leading Pakistani journalist and expert on Afghan politics, contradicts Dost's denial [14]. According to Khan, Dost was enrolled in Medina University in 1989 but was extradited by the Saudi authorities due to visa issues and returned to Peshawar [15]. Khan says in Medina, Dost got close to Arab extremist Islamists, who maintained a large presence in Peshawar during the peak of the Afghan-Soviet war. Dost's relationship with these Arab Islamists grew after he returned to Peshawar. Most of these Arab Islamists were members of al-Qaeda.

Sami Yousafzai, an internationally renowned Afghan journalist who has known Dost over the years, says that the mental torture that took place over his years in prison and the resulting suffering to his family and business turned Dost into an extremist writer [16]. Sami further says that Dost always remained critical of the Pakistani state for his arrest and his imprisonment in Guantanamo Bay. According to Sami, his harsh narrative against Islamabad made him famous in the TTP, but Yousafzai says that Dost never joined the group.

Dost – Founding Role in the Establishment of IS-K

Dost became an influential jihadist leader in the Af-Pak region due to his central role in establishing IS-K in late 2014 ([Jihadology](#), Jul 26, 2020). He announced his allegiance to Abu Bakr

Baghdadi just two days after the IS leader proclaimed himself as Caliph ([Archives](#), Jul 10th, 2014). This quick *bay'ah* (oath of allegiance) from Dost came from his decades-old desperation for the establishment of the Caliphate.

Before Baghdadi, he had also pledged loyalty to Juhiman al-Utaybbi in 1979, when the latter declared himself a Caliph during the siege of the Holy Mosque in Mecca ([Archives](#), July 10, 2014). Dost was in Mecca for Hajj, where he became a follower of al-Utaybbi during the siege. The Saudi security forces broke the siege, killing and arresting hundreds of followers, including the self-proclaimed Caliph. [17] Dost fled the scene and made his way back to Peshawar. Dost wrote a detailed book in Arabic, *Malak-ul-Amjaad*, on the religious debates surrounding the necessity of establishing an Islamic caliphate ([Archives](#), July 10, 2014).

Following his pledge to Baghdadi, Dost began an effort to convince other jihadist groups to join IS ([Nun Asia](#), July 12, 2016). Dost was then living in the Pakistani tribal areas of Khyber agency bordering his home province of Nangahar ([Nun Asia](#), July 12, 2016). Due to his organizing efforts on behalf of Baghdadi, the TTP leadership in the Orakzay agency – who were loyalists of Hakeem Ullah Mehsud, Dost's slain jihadist disciple – became the founding leadership of IS-K. Soon after IS-K was created, the mainstream media reported rumors that Dost was its head. However, it later emerged that Hafiz Saeed Khan became the TTP's central commander and emir of the group in Orakzay agency ([Dawn News](#), November 14, 2014; [The News](#), January 13, 2015).

Within a few months, IS-K shifted its headquarters to Nangarhar by forcing the

Afghan Taliban and government forces out from many districts in the area ([Nun Asia](#), Nov 21st, 2015). Notably, the home district of Dost, Kot, and its surrounding areas became the center of IS-K. During the IS-K's operations that established its strongholds in Nangarhar, the group inflicted heavy costs on local citizens, looting their properties and killing them for minor allegations.

Statements by Dost indicated that IS-K crimes against the people of Nangarhar highly enraged him ([Nun Asia](#), October 21, 2015). According to Dost, the decision of IS-K's leadership to shift its focus from attacks in Pakistan to Afghanistan forced him to separate from the group. Dost criticized IS-K leadership in the media, including Khan, for being ignorant, illiterate and not fulfilling the religious conditions for becoming a *Wali* (governor) of the Islamic Caliphate ([Kabull](#), October 18, 2015). He even accused Khan of being surrounded by covert ISI agents, who infiltrated the ISKP ranks through a pro-Pakistani Salafist group, Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT), which, Dost alleged, provided Khan with a large amount of funding ([Nun Asia](#), July 12, 2016).

According to Sami, Dost claims that his condemnation of IS-K resulted in the assassinations of two of his close family members. [18] His brother was mysteriously killed in IS-K-held territory in Nangarhar. Later, his nephew was killed in Syria. IS never claimed responsibility for these killings ([AIP](#), Jan 18th, 2016).

An Islamist Extremist Ideologue and an Anti-Pakistan Afghan Nationalist

A close reading of Dost's many essays and books show a unique aspect of his life. His writings, especially those he wrote after parting ways with IS-K, show that he is a Pashtun/Afghan nationalist. In his essays, he even praises Khan Abdul Ghafar Khan, a.k.a. Bacha Khan, praising him for his slogan of *Lar aw Bar Yao Pukhtoon* ("The Pashtun of Pakistan and Afghanistan are one") ([Dawat Media](#), February 9, 2018). Bacha Khan is the founder of modern Pashtun nationalism, who struggled for Pashtun rights during British rule in India. [19] He was a liberal nationalist leader and opposed religious extremism.

Dost's admiration for Bacha Khan is quite surprising for two reasons. First, Salafist jihadists typically oppose nationalism and consider it against their global agenda of pan-Islamism. Secondly, Bacha Khan opposed jihadist violence in Afghanistan since the 1973 uprising of Islamists against President Daud Khan, who Dost also revolted against ([Archives](#), July 10, 2014). [20] Bacha Khan even opposed the Afghan Islamists' war against Afghanistan's Soviet-backed communist regimes between 1978-1989. Bacha Khan openly regarded the Islamists fighting against the Afghan governments not as jihad, but as a proxy war between regional and global powers.

Dost's latest statement refuting the Pakistani state's recent allegations against him were similar to narratives used by Afghan/Pashtun nationalists ([Taand](#), November 18). Like them, Dost accused Islamabad of suppressing Afghanistan through its proxies in the country.

Afrasiab Khattak, a leading Af-Pak politician and expert on Afghan affairs, says that Dost's shift to nationalism from hardline Afghan jihadism is not an isolated event. Khattak reports that multiple other senior Afghan jihadists who have been active in the Islamist militancy in Afghanistan have undergone a similar ideological shift. [21] According to Khattak, this trend emerged post-2001, when some Afghan Islamists realized that regional powers were using the Islamist ideology to push their own interests and were not helping out of any sympathy for Islam or Afghanistan.

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Notes

[1] The author's interview with Rifat Ullah Orakzai, a Peshawar-based senior Pakistani journalist hailing from the Orakzay agency who has closely monitored TTP since the beginning of its formation, conducted remotely, December 5, 2020.

[2] For details on Islamists' revolt against President Daud Khan and support of Afghan communist parties in his military coup against King Zahir Shah, see Chris Sands and Fazelminallah Qazizai, *Night Letters*, (Hurst Publishers: London, 2019).

[3] Ibid.

[4] See Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost and Badru Zaman Badr, *Da Guantanamo Mati Zolani* (The Broken Shackles of Guantanamo) [In Pashto], (Al-Khilafa Publishers: Peshawar, 2006).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] For details on the post-9/11, al-Qaeda-linked arrests in Pakistan, see former Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf's memoir (Pervez Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire*, Hurst Publishers: London, 2006).

[12] The author's interview with Rifat Ullah Orakzai, conducted remotely, December 5, 2020.

[13] Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, *Inqilab-i-Mehsud*, (Mehsud's Revolution) [In Urdu], (Al-Shahab Publishers: Paktika, 2017).

[14] Dost and Badr, 2006.

[15] The author's interview with Tahir, an Islamabad-based senior Pakistani journalist and expert on Afghan militant and political groups, conducted remotely, December 8, 2020.

[16] The author's interview with Sami Yousafzai, a veteran Afghan journalist who has closely known Muslim Dost and his family over the years, conducted remotely, December 6, 2020.

[17] For details on Juhiman al-Utaybbi and Mecca's siege, see Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege*

of Mecca: The 1979 Uprising at Islam's Holiest Shrine, (Doubleday Publishers: USA, 2007).

[18] The author's interview with Sami Yousafzai, conducted remotely, December 6, 2020.

[19] For details on Khan Abdul Ghafar Khan, see Abdul Ghafar Khan, *My Life and My Struggle*, (Hind Pocket Books: Publishers, Delhi, 1969).

[20] For details, see Juma Khan Sufi, *Faraib-e-Natamam* (Unbelievable confessions) [In Urdu], (Pak Book Empire: Publishers, Lahore, 2015).

[21] The author's interview with Afrasiab Khattak, a senior Af-Pak politician and expert on Afghan affairs, conducted remotely, December 8, 2020.

Saif al-Adl: The Last Candidate Left to Lead al-Qaeda after Zawahiri

Shan A. Zain

Saif al-Adl is among a handful of remaining top al-Qaeda leaders and has been widely reported to be the one to take control of the international terrorist group if/when current chief Ayman al-Zawahiri dies. He is one of the most experienced al-Qaeda operatives and is highly revered within the jihadist group's ranks and literature. Interest in al-Adl and his possible leadership ascendancy has resurfaced amid growing speculation about the health of al-Zawahiri and the deaths of several leading figures. Al-Adl, the only known deputy of al-Zawahiri still alive, was among five top al-Qaeda officials who were released from jail in Iran in 2015. Three of them, Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni (a.k.a. Khalid al-Aruri), Abu Khallad al-Muhandis (a.k.a. Sari Shihab) and Abu al-Khayr al-Masri made their way to Syria, where they were subsequently killed. Abu Muhammad al-Masri was reportedly killed in Iran, which former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo confirmed on January 12 ([Times of Israel](#), January 12). That makes al-Adl the only figure of sufficient stature within al-Qaeda remaining to succeed al-Zawahiri. He is on the FBI's list of most wanted terrorists and is believed to have played an important role in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya.

From Special Forces Officer to al-Qaeda Security Chief

Al-Adl, aged 60, is a former Egyptian army lieutenant and member of the special forces. He

was born on April 11, either in 1960 or 1963, in Monufia Governorate. He has long served in Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), which was founded by Ayman al-Zawahiri, and has claimed he was involved in militant activities since the late 1980s. He was arrested along with thousands of other militants following the attempted assassination of Egyptian Interior Minister Hasan Abu Basha. He was later released for lack of evidence ([Al-Sharq al-Awsat](#), January 13). Al-Adl then travelled to Afghanistan to join al-Qaeda and quickly assumed important roles within the group, due in no small part to his strong military background. He became the head of al-Qaeda's security body that was responsible for the protection of Osama bin Laden and other key figures. Apart from his combat training role, he was also tasked with managing al-Qaeda's relationship with other militant groups and overseeing operations in the Afghan-Pakistan ("Af-Pak") border region. In 1993 al-Adl, along with Abu Muhammad al-Masri, travelled to East Africa and established a training camp in Somalia. This was used to train fighters loyal to Mohammed Farah Aydid, who fought against U.S. forces in Mogadishu ([Al-Masri al-Youm](#), August 4, 2019).

While in Afghanistan, al-Adl played a crucial role in mending ties between bin Laden and top jihadist figure Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who arrived in Afghanistan following his release from Jordanian imprisonment in 1999. It was al-Adl who convinced bin Laden to provide assistance to al-Zarqawi's Tawhid wal-Jihad organization and help him set up a training camp in Herat, Afghanistan, near the Iranian border. The new training facility would later become a major route through which al-Qaeda would move its operatives to Iran from Afghanistan and vice versa ([Al-Arabiya.net](#), June 16, 2020).

Al-Adl's real name is Muhamad Salah al-Din al-Zaydan and he been known by the aliases "al-Madani" and "Abir Sabil." For years, he was confused with Muhammad Ibrahim Makkawi, a former Egyptian army officer who had also travelled to Afghanistan to wage jihad against Soviet forces, like Saif al-Adl. Al-Adl is the son-in-law of another al-Qaeda veteran Khallad al-Muhandis and the jihadist group had extended condolences to al-Adl at the time of al-Muhandis' death in 2019 ([Al-Arabiya.net](#), March 1, 2012).

Role in Global Terror Operations

Al-Adl is one of al-Qaeda's most effective commanders and has played a key role planning and managing the group's operations in the Af-Pak region. He was present in Afghanistan when al-Qaeda carried out the 9/11 attacks and fled along with hundreds of other militants to Iran when the U.S.-led coalition invaded and began bombing jihadist hideouts ([Annahar al-Arabi](#), September 9, 2020). In October 2010, al-Adl returned to Pakistan following his release from Iran. Iranian authorities had released al-Adl in exchange for a diplomat, Heshmatollah Attarzadeh, who was kidnapped by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in 2008. Upon his return, al-Zawahiri urged him to establish a base in North Waziristan, which had become a hotbed for jihadists. From there, al-Adl worked with another al-Qaeda commander, Ilyas al-Kashmiri, a former Pakistan special forces soldier who had an association with regional militant groups such as Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami (HuJI) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). Al-Adl assigned al-Kashmiri the role of organizing attacks against Western targets ([The News](#), December 14, 2010).

Under al-Kashmiri, al-Qaeda strengthened its coordination with the TTP and jihadists operating in the wider region including Indian-administered Kashmir. In 2011, Ilyas al-Kashmiri, under the command of al-Adl, carried out a major attack on the Mehran navy base in Karachi. The attack was not only a morale boost for al-Qaeda. It showed the group's success in building operational partnerships with the TTP in order to target high-profile targets ([Outlook Magazine](#), June 6, 2011; [Dawn](#), May 23, 2011).

Following bin Laden's death, al-Adl was widely reported to be the new al-Qaeda leader. Before al-Zawahiri was announced as the new leader of the organization and in the absence of an official announcement from al-Qaeda on succession, al-Adl took command of the group, declaring that his mission was to avenge the killing of bin Laden. He set up a council to carry out special operations and major terror attacks worldwide, but in particular against Pakistan and the United States ([Al-Quds al-Arabi](#), November 10, 2010).

Al-Adl's name is also linked to another high-profile al-Qaeda operation in Pakistan—the kidnapping and subsequent murder of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl in 2002. The operation was implemented by another senior al-Qaeda commander, Khalid Mohammad Sheikh on orders from al-Adl. However, Sheikh later admitted that he was warned by al-Adl not to kill the U.S. journalist, saying it would not be wise to do so. Sheikh further revealed during his interrogation that al-Adl was also behind the foiled attack against a civilian passenger plane by Richard Reid, the "shoe-bomber" in December 2001 ([ORF](#), May 23, 2011).

Al-Adl's stay in Iran after 2001 proved to be a crucial phase in al-Qaeda's history. He cultivated good ties between the jihadist group and the Iranian establishment and while in Iran he acted as a messenger between al-Zawahri and other al-Qaeda branches such as al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In testimony written in 2005, Saif al-Adl acknowledged that Iran was providing al-Qaeda fighters with safe passage following Pakistan's strict crackdown against militants. Reports have even suggested al-Adl communicated from Iran with al-Qaeda fighters in Saudi Arabia 48 hours prior to the 2003 Riyadh bombing that targeted a residential complex in the Saudi capital ([Dawn](#), May 3, 2012; [Al-Masri al-Youm](#), August 4, 2019).

Influential Propagandist

Al-Adl has written prolifically 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. In one of the books, al-Adl analyses the revolution in Egypt and advises against peaceful resistance, urging people to wage armed jihad instead ([Archiv.org](#), December 24, 2019), ([24.ae](#), February 20)

He has written many articles about the importance of waging jihad in order to bring change to the Islamic world. In 2013 he wrote a 23-page paper titled "The Book of Revolution," which was shared by al-Qaeda's media arm al-Sahab in 2019. The work discusses revolutions and argues that armed jihad is the only way to establish a truly Muslim society. It analyses the Arab uprisings and claims the revolution in Egypt failed because people were unable to change the justice system that protected

members of the former administration. Its publication in 2019, coinciding with protests in Muslim countries such as [Egypt](#), [Iraq](#), [Lebanon](#), Sudan and Algeria suggests al-Qaeda's intent to capitalize on instability in Muslim countries ([Sahabmedia.co](#)).

Another key work of al-Adl is a short jihadist biography of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, titled, "Slaughtering of Leader Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi." The book documents his encounters with al-Zarqawi during the latter's stay in Afghanistan. The writer praises the jihadist world view of al-Zarqawi, claiming he was committed to taking revenge against Americans for the crimes he witnessed during the bombardment of Afghanistan.

Saif al-Adl is rarely featured in al-Qaeda propaganda videos, possibly to protect the secrecy of his status and whereabouts. In November 2017, al-Adl appeared briefly in a [video message by al-Zawahiri](#) among other prominent al-Qaeda members during celebrations marking the merger between Egyptian Islamic Jihad and al-Qaeda in 2001.

Renewed Focus and Future Leadership Prospects

Al-Adl's military skills and operational ability are undoubtedly linked to his indispensable position within al-Qaeda. However, past disagreements with bin Laden and al-Zawahiri may have played a role in pushing him down the ladder of the leadership hierarchy. This purported rift within al-Qaeda has been evident in several letters al-Adl wrote, openly criticizing al-Qaeda's strategies and the way the group was run. In the letter, dated June 2002, Saif al-Adl argued that al-Qaeda was operating recklessly, resulting in a

series of major setbacks for the organization. Al-Adl thought that bin Laden was unable to consider alternative opinions and was failing to understand the extent of the challenges faced by the movement.

Nonetheless, recent developments point toward his presumed elevated position within the group, making him the sole candidate to succeed al-Zawahiri. Earlier this year, al-Qaeda supporters promoted a channel on Telegram dedicated to the writings of 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 political affairs. In February 2017, al-Qaeda indicated al-Adl was alive and published an old lecture by him in which he incited attacks against the West. The lecture, dated 2000, discussed tactics for jihadists and identified Americans and Britons as the top targets. In August 2019, al-Qaeda supporters also 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. In the comments, al-Adl indirectly referred to setbacks suffered by pro-al-Qaeda groups in Syria and recommended a change of strategy for the group in the country (Telegram, August 14, 2019).

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