



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

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VOLUME XII, ISSUE 3 | March 2021

Who is Taliban Negotiator Mullah Sherin Akhund?

John Foulkes

On March 18, Russia hosted negotiations between the Taliban, the Afghan government, and representatives from the United States, China and Pakistan. The meeting was the first in a series of three international conferences intended to find a consensus for an interim Afghan government composed of the Taliban and the central government in Kabul, as proposed by the United States ([Gandhara](#), March 18). As of March 29, the Taliban spokesman, Mohammad Naeem, stated that the organization’s leadership was still reviewing the U.S.-proposed plan in preparation for the next international meeting, set to be held sometime in early April in Istanbul, Turkey ([TOLO News](#), March 29). The Taliban warned, however, that it would exercise its “legal right to free its homeland” should U.S. and coalition forces stay in the country past the May 1 deadline set in the February 2020 Doha agreement ([Arab News](#), February 2). In the background of these events, taking part in the meetings as a member of the Taliban negotiating team is Mullah Sherin

Akhund, a little known but influential leader within the Afghan insurgent group.

Akhund, a.k.a. Abdullah Hanafi, is from Kandahar and is a member of the Alizai tribe ([UN Security Council](#), May 16, 2018). He is a long-time member of the Taliban and its leadership council the *Rahbari Shura*, the organization’s leadership council better known as the *Quetta Shura*, having been a close aide of the organization’s founder Mullah Mohammad Omar. During the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2003, Sherin was one of the close associates to Omar who helped him escape from the province and evade coalition forces ([Afghan Bios](#), September 13, 2020). After fleeing from coalition forces, Akhund became head of Omar’s personal security detail for the next several years, becoming a close confidant of the Taliban supreme leader.

Following Omar’s death in 2013, which was not publicly announced by the Taliban until 2015, Akhund began taking on larger leadership roles within the organization. In 2016, he was placed in charge of overseeing the Taliban war efforts in 19 provinces in the country’s east and north as part of the organization’s military committee

([Afghan Analysts](#), June 22, 2016). By 2018, a UN Security Council report described him as the group's head of intelligence for the southern region, before he was moved to the shadow governorship of Kandahar in the same year during a political reshuffling of Taliban leadership by the organization's Supreme Leader Haibatullah Akhundzada ([UN Security Council](#), May 16, 2018). Akhund was reportedly replaced as intelligence chief by Mullah Hamidullah Akhund, who was considered closer to Akhundzada. Sherin Akhund was believed to be closely associated with the then-military chief of the Taliban, Ibrahim Sardar, a fact which might have worked against his ambitions ([Pakistan Today](#), February 1, 2018).

Sardar is believed to be one of the hardline Taliban leaders who is against the peace talks and the supposed concessions made in the February 2020 agreement with the United States. Allegedly, as a check on these hardline beliefs, Sardar was later replaced by Mullah Yaqoob, the prominent son of Mullah Omar, as military chief of the Taliban in May 2020 (see [Militant Leader Monitor](#), June 2, 2020; see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), July 2, 2020). Sherin Akhund's removal as intelligence chief, in hindsight, might be considered an early sign of Sardar's demotion and Akhundzada's later reorganization.

As the shadow governor of Kandahar, Akhund was charged with overseeing Taliban operations in the pivotal province. In October 2018, the former director of the National Directorate of Security (NDS), Afghanistan's intelligence agency, accused Akhund of orchestrating the assassination of Kandahar's police chief, General Abdul Raziq, with the help of Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) ([Khaama News Agency](#), October 23, 2018). Akhund was still listed as the

shadow governor of Kandahar in a UN Security Council report released in May 2020 ([UN Security Council](#), May 19, 2020).

Following the completion of U.S.-Taliban negotiations in February 2020, Akhundzada reshuffled the members of the organization's negotiating team. The talks that led to the Doha agreement were led by Mullah Abdul Ghani, better known as Mullah Baradar, and Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai. Stanikzai and Baradar were replaced as chief negotiators for the intra-Afghan talks by hardline cleric Abdul Hakim Ishaqzai (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), March 4). Three more negotiators were added, including Akhund.

The reshuffling was likely the result of Akhundzada tightening his grip on the negotiating team ahead of the intra-Afghan talks, similarly to how he asserted control of the military wing of the Taliban when he placed Mullah Yaqoob in charge. Akhund, Ishaqzai and the two other additions to the Taliban negotiating team all came from the Quetta Shura, meaning that they could be more answerable to Akhundzada's leadership.

Additionally, some analysts have speculated that Akhund's placement on the team, alongside Mawlawi Abdul Kabir and Ishaqzai, was done to sway hardline elements within the Taliban. Reportedly, Akhund was in a faction of the Quetta Shura—including Kabir and Ishaqzai, but also Mullah Yaqoob—who were opposed to the negotiating team involved in the February 2020 deal with the United States. Their inclusion in the team negotiating with the Afghan government was purportedly allowed in order to avoid division within the group, and to ensure that the various factions of the Taliban are represented in the pivotal negotiations ([Salaam Times](#), July 21, 2020).

The Taliban negotiating team is now preparing themselves for the imminent talks in Istanbul. As President Joseph Biden has hinted that the United States will not pull out of the country by May 1, as agreed upon in the February 2020 deal, the Taliban negotiating team is likely to make significant demands of the U.S. side to even consider this. At the same time, the group has threatened to target coalition forces that remain in the country after May 1 ([TOLO News](#), March 30). In either case, Akhund will be a part of ongoing events, ensuring that the Taliban likely will maintain a hardline against the American and Afghan negotiators. Whether the United States will withdraw on May 1 or stay in Afghanistan despite the agreement, Akhund should take a leading role in organizing the Taliban's operations, as he has done for more than two decades.

John Foulkes is the Editor of Militant Leadership Monitor

Mohamed Ahmed “Qahiye”: Islamic State’s Exiled Chieftain in Somalia Finds Refuge in Mozambique

Peter Kirechu

In late 2018, the Islamic State (IS) franchise in Puntland, Somalia, was convulsed by a violent power struggle that killed key allies and relatives of the group's self-styled emir, Abdulkadir Mumin (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), November 30, 2011). The internal putsch concluded with the abduction and subsequent assassination of the group's operational chief, Mahad Moalim, and the enforced exile of senior commander Mohamed Ahmed “Qahiye” ([UN Panel of Expert Reports](#), September 28, 2020). Beset by the swift slaughter of key allies, Qahiye reportedly fled northern Somalia in early 2020 for Ethiopia in an alleged amnesty deal endorsed by then-Puntland President Abdiweli Mohamed Ali Gaas. Qahiye then decamped to Mozambique, where he reportedly joined a broadening insurgency led by a separate IS affiliate in northeastern Mozambique ([UN Panel of Experts Report](#), September 28, 2020).

Mohamed Qahiye's flight from Somalia came on the heels of another high-profile killing of a second key Mumin deputy: Abdihakim Dhuqub ([Puntland Mirror](#), April 14, 2019). Dhuqub was killed in a U.S. airstrike in April 2019 while traveling by car near the northeastern town of Xiriro ([AFRICOM Press Release](#), April 15, 2019). Like Dhuqub, Qahiye was part of a notable cadre of al-Shabaab veterans-turned-defectors who joined Abdulkadir Mumin, a former al-Shabaab cleric, to establish the Puntland-based IS franchise in 2015. Others

included Mahad Moalim (assassinated in 2018) and Abdirashid Luqmaan (a.k.a. Abdiqani Luqman), the former head of IS military operations in Puntland (UN Panel of Experts Report, November 2, 2017).

Like Mumin, both Dhuqub and Maolim belonged to the Ali Salebaan branch of the Darod clan, which has significant socio-political clout in most of Puntland. Both Dhuqub and Moalim were reportedly related to the IS emir, as either cousins or nephews (UN Panel of Experts Report, November 2, 2017; Damqo.com, November 17, 2018). Moalim led al-Shabaab's *dawa* (proselytizing) efforts in Puntland and was the deputy head of finance for the organization in the Golis mountains. In this role, he organized weapon shipments and fighters from Yemen entering northeastern Somalia. Dhuqub, a former school teacher, led the formation of al-Shabaab's precursor, al-Itihaad al-Somalia (AIAI), in the Puntland capital of Bosaso back in 2004 (UN Panel of Experts Report, July 12, 2013). His efforts were then aided by other Mumin relatives, including renowned weapons smuggler and former pirate, Isse Yullux, who also hails from the Ali Salebaan subclan. Together, this cadre of militants and financiers – united by both blood and clan-based fealty – formed a loyal core of operational leaders closely aligned with the charismatic Mumin, and backed by other field operators like Mohamed Qahiye.

The aforementioned leadership rift in 2018 resulted in the deaths of both Moalim and Dhuqub, allowing Abdirishad Luqmaan to ascend to the position of head of indoctrination and proselytizing. Luqman's ascension forced Mohamed Qahiye into exile, first to Ethiopia in 2019, and later to Mozambique in 2020, where he reportedly joined the burgeoning IS franchise

(UN Panel of Expert Report, September 28, 2020).

Qahiye's reported arrival in Mozambique stands to benefit an already-escalating insurgency in the northeastern part of the country. This Islamist-headed rebellion is led by Ahlu-Sunnah Wa-Jama (ASWJ), a local militant group spurred into existence by a combination of economic neglect by the Mozambican government, predatory policing by local security forces, and violent clashes between young disaffected Muslims and the region's secular administrators. These tensions erupted into armed conflict in 2017, as armed Islamist rebels (later allied with ASWJ) sought to establish Sharia law across the northern province of Cabo Delgado. Since 2017, ASWJ has hewed closer to the regional constellation of IS affiliates operating under the broader umbrella of the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) (see Terrorism Monitor, March 11, 2020).

This alignment is bolstered by foreign fighters reportedly from South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, and Somalia, each cadre lending operational skill and ideological fervor to a once-localized insurgency (Club of Mozambique, September 3, 2020; RTP News, October 13, 2017; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, March 25, 2018). This foreign expertise appears most meaningful when delivered by experienced militants like Mohamed Qahiye. Back in 2017, Qahiye organized IS' first-ever attempted assassination of a government official (UN Panel of Experts, November 2, 2017).

This attack targeted a former regional governor in Puntland during a stay at the International Village Hotel in Bosaso. The attack involved two armed assassins who negotiated entry into the

hotel by luring a guard known to one of the attackers to open the gates to the compound. The armed assassins then fatally shot both guards, employing flanking maneuvers as they navigated through the hotel compound. Their plot was foiled by the unexpected presence of Puntland police officers who, unbeknownst to the two IS assassins, were at the time guarding a delegation of Emirati businessmen staying at the hotel (UN Panel of Experts, November 2, 2017). And while the attack ended in failure, the Qahiye-orchestrated operation was the first of dozens of IS-led targeted killings of local officials and businessmen in Puntland (Damqo TV, November 17, 2018).

Qahiye's prior experience as an operational commander, first with al-Shabaab and later with IS, likely enhances the ability of his new hosts in Mozambique to plan and execute similar attacks against both military and civilian targets. While much of the ASWJ's campaign in northeastern Mozambique initially focused on the seizure of small towns and villages, the group has since graduated to complex, coordinated attacks on district capitals, port seizures, and the capture of islands along the gas-rich northern Mozambican coastline (African Post, August 14, 2020; All Africa, March 25, 2020; CGTN Africa, September 12, 2020).

Further, ASWJ's temporary occupation of the port town of Mocimboa da Praia in August 2020 demonstrated its expanding military competency – an advantage likely enhanced by the presence within its ranks of experienced militant operators such as Qahiye. As the group shifts toward enforced occupation and administration of its seized territories, the tactics employed to suppress dissent and enforce control will likely borrow from ASWJ's militant affiliates in

Somalia and elsewhere in the region. It is here that Qahiye's role as a veteran militant operator may matter most. As the group expands its ability to target sophisticated and better-protected targets – including government, military, and business officials and facilities – the impact of Qahiye and others of his caliber may become more meaningful. It also highlights the looming danger of well-trained foreign fighters circulating within the broader milieu of armed Islamist militant operators across east, central and southern Africa.

Peter Kirechu is the former director of the Conflict Finance and Irregular Threats Program at the Center for Advanced and Defense Studies (CAADS). He is a specialist on illicit transnational networks and political conflict in the Middle East and Africa.

Abu Yassir Hassan Surfaces as the Leader of the Mozambican Insurgency

Sunguta West

Abu Yassir Hassan—a militant leader in Mozambique—is believed to be steering a deadly insurgency in the northern part of the country. Under his watch, a band of militants under the banner of Ansar al-Sunna has carried out deadly attacks in the gas-rich northern province of Cabo Delgado.

Al-Sunna is one of Africa’s newest Islamist extremist groups. Like the older militant factions on the continent, the group is also known by other names, including Ahlu Sunnah wal-Jamaah (ASWJ), Swahili Sunna, Ansaar Khalimat Allah and al-Shabaab or “The Youth.” Although it is often referred to locally by the same name as the Somali-based al-Qaida affiliate, there is no evidence that the groups have any connection ([Nation](#), March 13).

Al-Sunna has carried out strikes on government buildings, mosques and villages, burned houses and decapitated victims.

Until recently, the militant group’s leadership remained a mystery, with the identity of the man at the top of the command structure a matter of speculation. But that appeared to change recently when the United States announced sanctions against Hassan. Such sanctions are often seen as a boost to the jihadist credentials of an Islamist militant leader since it designates them as a global terrorist. But some analysts fear that while they are well understood in the United States, the militant groups and their leaders may not understand their meaning and significance.

The U.S. sanctions against Hassan were announced along with sanctions against the militant group he is allegedly leading—Ansar al-Sunna ([govinfo.gov](#), March 11). The group is

part of the Islamic State in the Central African Republic Province (ISCAP), which the Middle East-based organization claimed as a province in April 2019. The launch of ISCAP was reportedly part of its plan to establish a presence in Central, East and Southern Africa. Analysts say this part of its wider plan to establish a presence in new regions, as it loses its grip on the Middle East.

Hassan is also known by other aliases, including Yaseer Hassan and Abu Qasim. Although his exact date of birth is unknown, it is believed that he was born between 1981 and 1983 in Tanzania. He is believed to be 38 to 40 years old and allegedly lives or operates between the coastal region of Tanzania and the northern Mozambique province of Cabo Delgado. Since its inception, Ansar al-Sunna has concentrated most of its activities in the province.

Details about the jihadist remain scanty, but he is reportedly a Tanzanian Muslim religious leader. At the early stages of the group’s formation in Cabo Delgado province, the militant allegedly exerted great influence on Ansar al-Sunna. Some reports suggest that he is the leader of the Supreme Council of IS in Mozambique ([Afro News](#), March 19, 2021)

The group began in 2015 as a peaceful religious organization but gradually became militarized. Its first violent attack was recorded in 2017, when it targeted a police station in Mocimboa da Praia, before spreading to other districts in the northern parts of Cabo Delgado including Palma, Macomia, and Nangade ([Afro News](#), March 17, 2021).

Hassan reportedly lived in Macimboa de Praia between 2014 and 2015. He is also believed to have lived in the Congo and continued to maintain close links with extremist groups even after leaving the Central African country ([Afro News](#), March 17, 2021).

The identification of Hassan as one of the leaders of the Mozambican group adds his name

to a list of six people the Mozambican police named as Ansar al-Sunna leaders in 2018. Abdul Faizal, Abdul Remane, Abdul Raim, Nuno Remane, Ibn Omar and another person identified as Salimo were said to be the group's ring leaders (Club of Mozambique, August 13, 2020).

Meanwhile, the question of whether or not Hassan is the leader of the Mozambican militant group is stirring controversy. A recent statement by Tanzanian police has cast some doubt on whether he is still part of the militant group. With the announcement of U.S. sanctions, the Tanzanian police confirmed that they were aware of someone with that name, but stated that, according to their records, the individual had died. The police further stated that they would check their database to establish the credibility of the information provided by the U.S. government. At the same time, former fighters who have left the group have reportedly said in interviews that the group's leaders are Tanzanians (Nation, March 13, 2021) (Afro News, March 19, 2021).

The claim that there are Tanzanians in the ranks of Ansar al-Sunna gained further credibility in October, when the militant group attacked Mtwara in southern Tanzania. In the attack, the militants burned houses, destroyed an armored vehicle and stole money. At least 20 people died in the attack, the first by the group inside Tanzania (Jamestown, December 3, 2020)

The location where Hassan received training is not clear, but he is believed to be among the members of the group trained locally in Mozambique— reportedly by dissatisfied police and security guards— and in Tanzania. He might have also received training from militia chiefs in the Great Lakes region hired by Ansar al-Sunna in Tanzania, Kenya and Somalia (Club of Mozambique, June 14, 2018).

That Hassan was possibly among the earliest members of the organizations inspired by Aboud

Rogo Mohammed, a.k.a. Makaburi. Rogo, a radical Kenyan Muslim leader and an ideologue associated with the Somali-based al-Shabaab who died in unclear circumstances in Mombasa in 2012. Attempting to spread his legacy, some followers who fled Kenya allegedly settled in Kibiti in southern Tanzania before entering Mozambique to start an insurgency. Cabo Delgado, with its large population of Muslims, provided a suitable environment for the militant group to grow its membership (see Terrorism Monitor, June 14, 2018).

Since 2017, under Hassan's command, the militant group has killed approximately 1,500 civilians. Since the start of its insurgency, 2,500 people have been killed in the violence, including civilians, security force members and the militants. Nearly 700,000 people have been displaced due to the violence. For some time, Hassan's group had been dismissed as a small insurgency that would dissipate, but the successful capture, albeit temporarily, of the strategic port city of Macimboa da Praia in August 2020 alarmed security experts (Sunday Times, August 31, 2020).

Hassan was designated alongside Shaykh Seka Musa Baluku, the leader of Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), which is affiliated with IS and located in the Democratic Republic of Congo. ADF, also known as Madina at Tauheed Wau Mujahedeen, originates from Uganda. Although IS-Mozambique and IS-DRC are often portrayed as one unit under the ISCAP umbrella, they are distinct groups with different origins, different leaders and different areas of operation (Africanews, March 11).

Although reports that Hassan is leading the Mozambican militant group have been met with some skepticism from the Tanzanian police force, available information indicates that some foreigners are leading the militant group. At the same time, deserters have indicated that there are Tanzanians at the helm of the organization, Hassan possibly being one of them. Hassan's

alleged links with militants in the Congo and the fact that he is a Tanzanian national gives him an international image and the potential background and experience necessary to lead such an insurgency.

Whether or not Hassan will release a video or statement soon remains to be seen. Still, Ansar al-Sunna is succeeding in making its presence as a militant group felt in Mozambique.

Sunguta West is an independent journalist based in Nairobi.

How the Islamic State Commandeers Syrian Tribal Networks—The Case Study of Saddam al-Jamal

Haian Dukhan and Sinan Hawat

Saddam al-Jamal, a.k.a. Abu Roqaiyya al-Ansari, is a notorious member of Islamic State (IS), and his arrest in May 2018 evoked strong reactions, both in the region and across the world. Al-Jamal was captured, along with four other high-level IS members, by Iraq’s intelligence agency in a raid coordinated with the U.S.-led coalition ([Alarabiya](#), May 10, 2018). The arrest prompted then-U.S. President Donald Trump to tweet: “Five Most Wanted leaders of ISIS just captured!” Jamal held a senior position in IS’ intelligence apparatus and was suspected of involvement in human rights abuses committed by the group. Recruiting Saddam al-Jamal into the ranks of IS had a twofold significance for the organization. First, al-Jamal’s successful recruitment into IS demonstrates the group’s desire to use local figures to create bonds with the local community in Syria with the aim of building a popular base at the grassroots level. Secondly, al-Jamal shows how IS exploits rifts between social groups and militias to penetrate local societies and recruit agents, to the group’s advantage. Today, as eastern Syria experiences increasingly severe tensions between disenfranchised groups, al-Jamal’s insurgent career offers valuable lessons to policymakers and analysts.

Jamal’s Upbringing and his Involvement in the Syrian Civil War

Al-Jamal was born in 1978 in the Syrian city of Albukamal, near the Iraqi border, to a family of

nine. He belongs to the *al-Nuim tribe*, whose members are located in both Iraq and Syria. This tribe does not have a large number of members in the eastern Syrian governorate of Deir ez-Zur, where the Egidate and Baggara tribes dominate. Despite not belonging to these tribes, al-Jamal's father was a prominent figure in the region who solved problems in the community in accordance with tribal reconciliation laws. This gave al-Jamal the opportunity to spend his formative years meeting members of other tribes and families, allowing him to create strong bonds with the community around him. Al-Jamal finished his education at the age of 18 and obtained a vocational school certificate. He became involved in smuggling in his early 20s.

Smuggling was a common profession in Albukamal, as it was close to the border with Iraq, which did not allow commerce for decades during the reign of Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein ([Kuna](#), January 16, 2011). Despite the closure of the borders in 1982, smuggling remained a lucrative trade for many people who lived in the border areas. Al-Jamal talks about smuggling cigarettes, livestock and truffles from Iraq to Syria ([Facebook](#), June 4, 2019). In 1998, the two regimes re-established ties and opened border crossings. Al-Jamal claims that after this date, he obtained official documents to trade goods across the border and started moving legally between the two countries, buying and selling a variety of different products ([YouTube](#), June 4, 2019). After the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, thousands of Arab and Syrian fighters crossed the border to join the Iraqi insurgency. Smugglers on the Syrian side of the border played an important role in facilitating their movement across the border ([Noon Post](#), November 11, 2019). In a video interview with

NAS media, however, al-Jamal denied playing any role in facilitating the crossing of fighters into Iraq during that period ([YouTube](#), January 24, 2019).

Before the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011, al-Jamal participated in what were initially peaceful protests in Albukamal against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The regime used military force against protesters in Albukamal in 2012, reportedly killing 15, which al-Jamal claims motivated him to join the insurgency ([YouTube](#), January 24, 2019). This was the beginning of his involvement in the armed resistance against the regime. He established the Allah Akbar Brigade as a part of the Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades, which belonged to the Free Syrian Army (FSA). His background and connections in the area allowed him to earn the backing of the senior leadership in the FSA ([Arab48](#), May 25, 2019). In 2012, the Antalya conference that convened to unite opposition forces fighting the Assad regime selected al-Jamal as the assistant deputy chief of staff for eastern Syria. [1]

Conflict with al-Nusra Front and Joining Islamic State

When the Syrian uprising started, Islamic State sent Syrian jihadists, who had been trained by Iraqi experts, into Syria to establish a Syrian base for the group, later called al-Nusra Front. Tensions between al-Jamal and members of al-Nusra Front emerged, apparently as part of the jihadist group's attempts to seize military control of eastern Syria from the FSA ([Arab48](#), May 25, 2019). Sources agree that during that time, al-Nusra Front killed two of al-Jamal's brothers ([youm7](#), July 12, 2018). This provoked a personal grudge on al-Jamal's part, which IS likely later exploited to recruit him.

By 2013, a rift had grown between IS and al-Nusra Front. The leadership of al-Nusra Front had refused to merge under the banner of IS. This led to divisions among the jihadists of eastern Syria, as some allied with IS while others were affiliated with al-Nusra Front. Al-Jamal claims that al-Nusra Front's assassination of his brothers pushed him to join IS. However, he has contradicted himself on exactly how he joined IS in different media interviews ([YouTube](#), January 24, 2019). In another interview, al-Jamal claimed that he was forced to join IS after they detained him at the beginning of 2013 ([YouTube](#), May 12, 2019). Al-Jamal claimed that he only gained his freedom after his family handed over some of their weapons to IS.

Upon returning to Albukamal, tension mounted between al-Jamal and al-Nusra Front members again, as they accused him of cooperating with IS. They killed his third brother and forced him out of Albukamal after they took control of most of the Deir ez-Zur area. Al-Jamal found refuge in Shadadi, in northeastern Deir ez-Zur, which was under the control of IS.

In December 2013, al-Jamal appeared in a video released by the media wing of IS, regretting that he had joined FSA and calling on other FSA groups to distance themselves from opposition groups, accusing them of "fighting Islamists and hindering the establishment of the rule of God" ([Facebook](#), December 1, 2013). The video portrayed FSA and other opposition groups as foreign entities whose primary aim was to fight IS. In answering questions about FSA, al-Jamal revealed that Qatar was the primary supporter of the organization, with the involvement of intelligence agencies, including those of the United Kingdom, France and the United States. This video announcement represented al-Jamal's official declaration that he had joined Islamic

State ([Facebook](#), December 1, 2013). Subsequently, al-Jamal appeared in a number of other media releases. In each of these, he pledged his allegiance to IS.

Ascending Through the IS Ranks

In April 2014, al-Jamal led his first assault with IS, in which they attempted to seize Albukamal from al-Nusra Front ([Orient News](#), May 17, 2018). The assault focused on al-Nusra Front's religious commission in the city and they managed to kill the head of the commission, along with many other group members ([France24 Arabic](#), April 11, 2014). However, the attack failed to take control of the city, and local authorities in the area apparently issued a statement marking al-Jamal as a legitimate target for the crimes he had committed during the attack.

In July 2014, IS managed to seize large swathes of territory in Deir ez-Zur, approximately at the same time the Iraqi city of Mosul was captured. The role of al-Jamal during this period is not clear, although he is widely accused of leading the IS offensive against the al-Sheitat tribe, in northwestern Albukamal, in August 2014. More than 700 people were executed in attacks that reportedly lasted two weeks ([aman.dostor.org](#), May 11, 2018).

Al-Jamal assumed the role of head of the intelligence service in Wilayat al-Furat, an area that used to straddle the territories of both Syria and Iraq, and settled in Albukamal. He confessed that he used his contacts in the city to convince its people to stop attacking IS forces. He subsequently took on a role in military intelligence in the wider Deir ez-Zur governorate. In 2016, al-Jamal received a financial gift from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the

then-leader of IS, for his services. He was also given the name “Abu Roqaiyya al-Ansari.”

Opportunism and Complicity in Atrocities

Overall, the perception of al-Jamal is that of a pragmatic figure who did not come from a religious background. His involvement in smuggling and, allegedly, in drug trafficking, is often cited as proof of his generally opportunistic attitude, which likely extended to his joining ISIS. His apathetic attitude toward religion apparently led to an IS court sentencing him to a whipping for smoking in public. Social media users who opposed al-Jamal circulated a photo that allegedly showed him smoking shisha tobacco, and used it to prove his hypocrisy and non-religious behavior.

A review of video clips of al-Jamal over his active period in the Syrian civil war, before and after joining IS, shows that al-Jamal has at least used religious language to legitimize himself among his supporters. The Islamist symbolism and references were noticeably clear in the media sources associated with the brigade al-Jamal created before joining IS and the speeches he gave during that time ([YouTube](#), May 29, 2012). During his period with IS, in one video al-Jamal appears to be giving a sermon about women, decency and religious laws ([Facebook](#), October 1, 2017).

Social media accounts and testimonies from those who knew him portray al-Jamal as an extremely violent person. In addition to the aforementioned al-Sheitat massacre, various social media accounts featuring photos allegedly showing al-Jamal near mutated dead bodies and severed heads were circulated widely. In one case, al-Jamal seemed to be posing with severed heads, which appear burned, though the most

high-profile crime in which al-Jamal is accused of involvement is the execution of the Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kassasbah in January 2015 ([Twitter.com/AR2011B](#), May 9, 2018). The family of the victim have repeatedly demanded that Iraqi authorities hand al-Jamal over to Jordan for sentencing there ([YouTube](#), May 4, 2019).

Al-Jamal’s involvement in this crime, however, is uncertain. In addition to al-Jamal’s own denial, which one can easily dismiss, no Iraqi court appears to have charged him with the murder of Kassasbah and several reports appear to suggest that al-Jamal indeed had no connection to the murder. The late Hisham al-Hashimi, an Iraqi historian and researcher of strategic affairs and extremist groups, denied in a 2018 tweet that al-Jamal had any connection to the murder of Kassasbah ([Twitter.com/hushamalthashimi](#), May 15, 2018).

His Arrest

Al-Jamal was arrested on May 9, 2018, along with four other high-level IS members: Isam Abdulqader al-Zawbaai, Omar Shihab Qaraboli, Mohammad Hussain al-Qadir, and Ismail Ilwan al-Ithawi. Iraq’s intelligence agency conducted the operation in coordination with the U.S.-led coalition. According to Iraqi security authorities, Ithawi’s initial arrest was in February in Turkey and he was handed over to Iraqi intelligence. Ithawi was one of Baghdadi’s closest assistants and was responsible for financial transfers and overseeing IS bank accounts abroad. According to Hashimi, Iraqi intelligence appeared to have used the Telegram application in Ithawi’s phone to lure the other four leaders from Syria to Iraq, which made their arrest possible ([Reuters Arabic](#), May 10, 2018). Al-Jamal’s current whereabouts, his status within the

Iraq's penal system, and whether or not he is even alive is currently unknown.

Despite IS' defeat in Syria and Iraq, local communities are still in fear of the group's resurgence. The case of Saddam al-Jamal shows how IS worked for many years to root itself into local tribal communities. Researchers' attention has often focused on IS' attempts to co-opt traditional tribal leaders with the aim of preventing the United States from using the tribes against it in a similar way to the U.S. utilization of the tribes against al-Qaeda in Iraq in between 2005 and 2013. Co-opting young people such as al-Jamal and others who have charisma and the connections in their communities shows how IS has gone beyond the traditional tribal networks to reinforce its existence among the tribes. As a result, more efforts should be done to identify these socially connected figures that might contribute to the group's potential resurgence.

Haian Dukhan is a Carnegie Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Central European University's Centre for Religious Studies. He is the author of "State and Tribes in Syria: Informal Alliances and Conflict Patterns" (Routledge, 2019).

Sinan Hawat is a London-based researcher specialising in complex emergencies and humanitarian aid. He has an M.Sc. in Development Management from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Notes

[1] Statement on the Formation of the Supreme Military Council, June 2011: <https://carnegie-mec.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=50446>

Will New Sanctions Slow Down Houthi Commanders Mansur al-Saadi and Ahmad al-Hamzi in Yemen?

Michael Horton

On March 2, the United States imposed sanctions on two senior military commanders of the Houthi organization: Mansur al-Saadi, chief of staff of the Houthis' Navy and Ahmad al-Hamzi, commander of the Houthis' Air Force (Middle East Eye, March 2). The announcement by the U.S. Department of the Treasury cited the two commanders' involvement in cross-border attacks and assaults on international shipping. [1] The sanctions are designed to block the designees' access to any assets held in the United States and to block their ability to transact with U.S. persons or U.S. registered entities. Sanctioning these two individuals will have no impact on them since it is unlikely that either of the two men hold assets outside of Yemen.

The imposition of sanctions on al-Saadi and al-Hamzi followed the reversal of the designation of the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) by the Biden administration (al-Jazeera, February 12). As such, it is more a case of political posturing and messaging than a real attempt to impede the ability of these two commanders to operate in Yemen. Singling out these two military commanders will have little impact on the continued development of the forces they—at least nominally—oversee.

Mansur al-Saadi: Houthi Naval Forces Chief of Staff

Mansur al-Saadi, often referred to as Abu Sajjad, hails from Saada, a Houthi stronghold in northwestern Yemen (al-Arabiya, March 2). Al-Saadi, who is in his early 30s, almost certainly joined the Houthis as a fighter in his late teens.

At that time, the Houthis were engaged in a bitter and protracted war against the Yemeni Army, which lasted from 2004 to 2010. The Houthis recruited hundreds and, later on, thousands, of teenagers and young men from Saada and the neighboring governorates of Hajjah and Amran. It was during these years, and what ended up being six wars separated by short periods of relative calm, that the Houthis developed their formidable fighting skills.

Despite being outgunned, outmanned, and, at times, desperately short of ammunition and supplies, the Houthis fought the Yemeni Army and Air Force to a standstill. In 2009-10, Saudi Arabia intervened in the war by launching airstrikes and deploying small numbers of special forces soldiers. The Houthis killed and captured numerous Saudi soldiers, and as a result, Saudi Arabia ended its direct involvement in the war. [2]

The bitter wars that the Houthis fought between 2004 and 2010 acted as a deadly laboratory in which they perfected their guerrilla tactics and their strategies of tribal engagement. The wars forced the Houthis and their fighters to either evolve and refine their skills or die. The wars were a catalyst for the development of what are some of the most capable guerrilla fighters in the world. The fact that Mansur al-Saadi survived these years all but guaranteed that he was capable and would be favored for promotion.

The Houthis, especially in their early years, functioned as a meritocracy. Even within the al-Houthi family itself, those who proved their merit on the battlefield rose in the ranks. Those who were not capable either did not survive or would be denied command roles. The senior leadership of the Houthis is insular and dominated by the family. Those individuals in senior roles, like al-Saadi, are most often men who have fought alongside the Houthis since the first years of their battle against the Yemeni government of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Al-Saadi, who began his career as a foot soldier, rose through the Houthis' informal but clearly defined ranks. After the cessation of widespread fighting following the revolt against former president Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011, al-Saadi likely traveled to Iran and possibly Lebanon for training. Some evidence also points to al-Saadi being an active early participant in the Houthis' attempts to procure specialized weapons and materiel. [3] Al-Saadi is said to have been aboard the Jihan 1 ship when it was boarded by the Yemeni Coast Guard on January 23, 2013. The ship was carrying a large cache of small arms, explosives and diesel supposedly bound for Somalia. The government of Iran denied all links to the vessel and the arms it was carrying. Al-Saadi is reported to have been taken prisoner after the ship was seized along with three Iranian Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) personnel and two members of Hezbollah. [4] He was subsequently released when the Houthis took over Sana'a in September 2014.

While al-Saadi is chief of staff of the Houthis' naval forces, he has no naval background. Al-Saadi was chosen for the role due to his being a trusted member of the Houthi leadership's outer circle. He may have also been chosen due to the relationship he has with Yemen's well-established arms smugglers. It is the men around al-Saadi who are responsible for the development of the Houthis' weapons and tactics. Many of these individuals do have naval backgrounds and extensive training since many were formerly members of the Yemeni Coast Guard and Navy.

The weapons and tactics used by the Houthis' navy closely resemble those used by the Iranian Republican Guard Navy (IRGCN). The IRGCN is distinct from the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN). The IRGCN is tasked with coastal defenses and, over the last ten years, has built out its asymmetric warfare capabilities. These naval forces rely largely on fast patrol boats, skiffs, unmanned vessels, semi-submersible vessels, and mines to carry out its missions. The IRGCN has

worked to perfect its ability to “swarm” larger ships with fast patrol boats—both manned and unmanned—to destroy or overtake them. [5]

While the Houthis’ capabilities and budget are quite limited, the weapons they are developing and the tactics they employ all point to growing Iranian involvement. The Houthis failed to seize any of the Yemeni Navy’s or Coast Guard’s ships or boats. All of the Yemeni Navy ships are inoperable. However, the Houthis do use small boats and skiffs to patrol the limited areas of Yemen’s west coast that they control. More concerning is the Houthis use of unmanned boats loaded with explosives and mines. The mines and remote-control boats are manufactured in Yemen, but, just as with the Houthis drones, rockets, and missiles, there is evidence that Iran is providing key components and technical help.

The Houthis have carried out numerous attacks on ships transiting the Red Sea. Ships have been targeted with rockets (seized by the Houthis from the Yemeni Armed Forces), mines, and remote-controlled explosive laden boats ([Arab News](#), November 26, 2020; [Daily Sabah](#), December 25, 2020).

Ahmad al-Hamzi: Commander of the Houthi’s Air Force

Less is known about Ahmad al-Hamzi who was appointed to head the air force at the beginning of 2019. Al-Hamzi replaced Major General Ibrahim al-Shami, who was likely assassinated as a result of internal disputes within the Houthi organization ([Youm7](#), March 2; see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), April 3, 2019).

Like al-Saadi, al-Hamzi is from Saada and is in his early or mid-30s. Al-Hamzi held no public role before his appointment as commander of the Air Force. However, he, like al-Saadi, was likely an early member of the Houthi movement and has risen through the ranks. It is reported that al-Hamzi received some training in Iran.

The Houthis’ Air Force, like its Navy, is not a conventional force. All of the Yemeni Air Force’s aircraft were either destroyed or rendered inoperable following Saudi Arabia’s and the UAE’s intervention in March 2015. Instead, the Houthis’ Air Force is made up entirely of unmanned drones, rockets and missiles. In contrast with their naval forces, the Air Force is far larger, better funded and more capable. The Houthis have fully integrated the use of drones into their armed forces. Even the smallest units—often no more than ten men—use hand-launched drones to conduct surveillance. The Houthis’ Air Force is responsible for developing, supplying and maintaining these drones as well as the Houthis’ missiles and rockets, which it uses to attack targets within Saudi Arabia ([TRT World](#), March 26).

Al-Hamzi, like al-Saadi, is a member of the Houthis’ trusted outer circle of leaders. However, it is those in the inner circle—largely members of the Houthi family—who make most key decisions. It is difficult to ascertain how much control al-Hamzi or al-Saadi have over their respective forces. Given the importance of the air force to the Houthis, al-Hamzi was undoubtedly carefully chosen and vetted by the Houthis’ top leaders. However, the Houthis also routinely appoint figureheads to public roles as a way of diverting attention from those who actually make key decisions. [6]

Outlook

The U.S. decision to sanction al-Saadi and al-Hamzi will have little or no impact on them or the Houthis’ ability to continue to develop their military capabilities. As a group and as individual members, the Houthis are all but impervious to financial sanctions, since they do not rely on international banking. As long as the war in Yemen persists, the Houthis will continue to develop their capabilities across multiple fronts. They, like nation-state militaries around the globe, recognize that unmanned war fighting

technologies are cheap, relatively easy to develop and deploy, and ideal for asymmetric warfare.

Michael Horton is a fellow for Arabian Affairs at the Jamestown Foundation. Horton has completed in-depth field-based studies on a range of subjects and issues related to security and development in the Middle East and Africa for the public and private sectors. He has briefed senior members of the U.S. National Security Council, the U.S. State Department, the British Foreign Ministry, British Ministry of Defense, as well as members of the British Parliament and U.S. Congress. Michael is a co-founder of Red Sea Analytics International (RSAI).

Notes

[1] See: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0043>

[2] See: “Borderline Crisis,” *Janes Intelligence Review*, January 2010.

[3] Author interview with a Yemen-based analyst, March 2021.

[4] See: “Could the Houthis be the Next Hizballah? Iranian Proxy Development in Yemen and the Future of the Houthi Movement,” Rand Corporation 2020.

[5] See: Anthony H. Cordesman, “The Gulf and Iran’s Capabilities for Asymmetric Warfare,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 13, 2020.

[6] Author interview with a Yemen-based analyst, March 2021.

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