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Personalities Behind the Insurgency

BRIEF

JOHN FOULKES

JNIM Deputy Leader Ag Albaka Killed in Northern Mali: Fluke or Sign of Counter-Terrorism Progress?

JACOB ZENN

France Expels Islamic State-Linked Bangladeshi Extremist: Saif al-Rahman

ANIMESH ROUL

Death of Abu Yasser al-Issawi Unlikely to Affect Islamic State

ANDREW DEVEREUX

Yemen's Houthi Head of Intelligence Abu Ali al-Hakim Wages War in Marib

RAMI JAMEEL

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Islamic State Claims Responsibility for Assassination of Taliban Shadow Governor in Peshawar

John Foulkes

On April 19, two members of Islamic State (IS) riding on motorcycles fired upon a vehicle traveling in the area of Haji Camp, near Peshawar, in Pakistan. The shooting resulted in the death of Maulvi Naik Muhammad Rahbar, the Taliban's shadow governor of Nangarhar province. Also injured was the head of the Rahbar's network in the province, Azizullah Mashhur Mustafa ([Twitter.com/ZiaulhaqAmarkhi](https://twitter.com/ZiaulhaqAmarkhi), April 19).

Though background information on Rahbar is scarce, he is a Sunni Muslim Pashtun from the Khogyani district in southern Nangarhar, and is believed to have been 35-years-old at the time of his death ([Twitter.com/bsarwary](https://twitter.com/bsarwary), April 19; [Afghan Bios](#), August 6, 2018). Rahbar was a key leader of the Taliban, having led the insurgency's forces in a crucial province on the border with Pakistan. Rahbar was most

acclaimed for leading Taliban forces against Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K), who claimed responsibility for his death soon after the attack. IS-K established a foothold in Nangarhar in June 2015, with the province quickly becoming their stronghold in the country. The group's territory was only reclaimed following a multiyear campaign from both Taliban and Afghan forces, with U.S. assistance. Rahbar oversaw Taliban operations against IS-K, after that group first seized territory in Nangarhar in June 2015. IS-K was likely motivated to remove Rahbar due to this past history ([Twitter.com/AbdulMateenImr1](https://twitter.com/AbdulMateenImr1), April 19).

Rahbar is only the most recent Taliban leader to be assassinated while in Pakistan. Maulvi Abdul Hadi, the Taliban shadow governor of Laghman, and Abdul Samad Mullah Toor, another influential senior commander, were killed in Peshawar in February and January, respectively. This Hadi and Toor were both killed while in Peshawar, showing the danger Taliban commanders face when entering Pakistan. While in Pakistan, often posing as refugees, Taliban leaders are less protected and

less armed than they typically are while on campaign in Afghanistan. The Taliban's enemies, including IS-K, but also the United States—which has committed drone strikes against the group in Pakistan—have taken advantage of these vulnerabilities to strike influential leaders ([Arab News](#), April 20).

In a statement released the day after Rahbar's assassination, the Taliban stated, "Due to the recent rise in hopes for lasting peace and full Islamic rule in the country, the internal and external enemies of the Islamic Emirate want to martyr the peaceful leaders of the Islamic Emirate who want to find a peaceful solution to the ongoing crisis in the country" ([Voice of Jihad](#), April 20). The statement reflects the widespread belief among the Taliban that the group is on the verge of victory in the country following President Joe Biden's announcement of a withdrawal from the country by September 11 ([TOLO News](#), April 29). It also portends the potential danger of an IS-K revival following a U.S. withdrawal from the country.

Though IS-K has lost its territorial holdings in Afghanistan, it is currently undergoing an operational resurgence, claiming responsibility for multiple suicide bombings and targeted killings in the past year. Suicide bombings by IS-K have targeted Afghan minorities, such as an attack against Shia Hazaras in October 2020 that killed 24 ([Anadolu Agency](#), October 25, 2020). The UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan stated in a recent report that IS-K was responsible for 673 casualties in 2020 ([UNAMA](#), 2020). A suicide bombing at the funeral of an influential police commander in Nangarhar in May 2020 also resulted in 24 deaths ([Al Jazeera](#), May 12, 2020). Despite the Taliban's seeming dedication to clearing IS-K

from its territory in Afghanistan, the vacuum left by U.S. forces, combined with the loss of Rahbar and other leaders, could result in a resurgence for the Islamic State province if the Taliban redirect resources to combat government troops in other parts of the country.

Rahbar's assassination will likely hamper Taliban operations against IS-K in Nangarhar in the short-term. He was an experienced insurgent commander, with deep ties to the local community. Video footage of his funeral in his home district of Khogyani demonstrated that the ceremony was well attended by potentially hundreds of locals, who largely venerated the Taliban leader for his battlefield successes against IS-K ([Twitter.com/paykhar](#), April 20). His loss, combined with the creation of a security vacuum created by a withdrawal of U.S. forces, is likely to prove a boon for remaining IS-K forces in Nangarhar.

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JNIM Deputy Leader Ag Albaka Killed in Northern Mali: Fluke or Sign of Counter-Terrorism Progress?

Jacob Zenn

On April 5, Abdallaye ag Albaka was reportedly killed during an attack by the Group for Support of Muslims and Islam (JNIM) in the northern Malian town of Aguelhok (leparisien.fr, April 5). The attack targeted a United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) base and was a failure for JNIM. It led not only to the death of Ag Albaka, but also that of 40 JNIM fighters. Other JNIM members were arrested during the sweep-up operations that took place in the aftermath of the assault (maliactu.net, April 11).

According to MINUSMA, 1,400 Chadian troops are among the 15,000 MINUSMA soldiers in northern Mali, including in Kidal, Tessalit and Aguelhok. The Chadians formed the vast majority of the troops that thwarted Ag Albaka and his fighters in Aguelhok ([Twitter.com/PDWilliamsGWU](https://twitter.com/PDWilliamsGWU), April 21). Four Chadian troops, however, were killed in the attack and subsequently honored in Chad's capital, N'djamena (alwihdainfo.com, April 17). This attack occurred before the current unrest in Chad began, which resulted from President Idriss Deby's death in battle against Chadian rebels on April 19. The Chadian soldiers' performance was considered a major accomplishment for the country's deployment in Mali (alwihdainfo.com, April 5).

Aguelhok was also the town where, in 2012, Tuareg mercenaries previously employed by the

regime of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya launched a major attack, killing dozens of Malian soldiers (aljazeera.com, April 24, 2013). Just before the beginning of hostilities, Ag Albaka had been the mayor of Tessalit, not far from Aguelhok (tvmonde.com, April 3). Like the current JNIM Emir Iyad ag Ghaly, Ag Albaka made the decision to join the Tuareg fighters and revolt against the Malian state in 2012. This was, in fact, somewhat predictable. In the previous Tuareg rebellion, which lasted from 2007 to 2009, Ag Albaka's deputies had rebelled against the Malian state and were implicated in an attack on Malian soldiers even while Ag Albaka was the mayor of Tessalit (malijet.com, May 5, 2008).

Ag Albaka gained a reputation for being a close follower of Ag Ghaly (Agence France-Presse, April 5). Thus, when Ag Ghaly agreed to a peace deal with the Malian state that was implemented in 2009, Ag Albaka joined him. Little is known about Ag Albaka's religious radicalization, but during the 2000s Ag Ghaly gradually adopted a Salafist worldview under the influence of Tablighi Jamaat, a transnational Islamist organization. Ag Ghaly also briefly worked as a Malian diplomat in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in 2007. The position was given to him as a form of compensation for his withdrawal from the Tuareg rebellion that year (wikileaks.org, November 29, 2007).

Thus, when the 2012 Tuareg rebellion was launched, Ag Ghaly and his number two, Ag Albaka, both first joined the rebels, which included a tacit alliance between the Movement for Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, and Ansar al-Din (Supporters of the Religion). The latter,

Ansar al-Din, was led by Ag Ghaly, with Ag Albaka as his sidekick, and adopted a jihadist vision even though it maintained a Tuareg ethno-national base ([France24.com](https://www.france24.com/en/20120612-ansar-al-din-captures-northern-mali), June 12, 2012). Together with AQIM and MUJWA, Ansar al-Din, which was based in Kidal, captured northern Mali, ousted the Malian government forces, and began imposing Sharia law from April 2012 onward.

After Paris launched Operation Serval in December 2012, France and allied national armies, including units from Mali and Chad, expelled MUJWA, Ansar al-Din and AQIM from northern Mali. However, in 2017, JNIM was formed, which comprised AQIM's Sahel-based brigade, Ansar al-Din and Ansar al-Din's Fulani sub-unit, Katiba Macina. According to a United Nations security official, Ag Albaka became the number three ranking official in JNIM's hierarchy after its emir, Ag Ghaly, and his deputy and Katiba Macina's leader, Hamadou Kufa ([tvmonde.com](https://www.tvmonde.com/en/20170405-ansar-al-din-leader-killed), April 5).

Since 2017, JNIM has been conducting a highly successful insurgency and has become more active than AQIM itself in the Sahel ([Terrorism Monitor](https://www.terrorismmonitor.com/en/20170421-jnim-attacks-minusma-base), April 21, 2017). The group has also conducted attacks on the MINUSMA base in Aguelhok before, including killing 10 peacekeepers in 2019 ([news.un.org](https://www.news.un.org/en/story/2019/01/1901201), January 20, 2019). The failed attack that led to Ag Albaka's death, therefore, appears to be an aberration and not necessarily indicative of a broader MINUSMA crackdown against JNIM.

Furthermore, it remains to be seen how well Chadian troops can continue to withstand JNIM attacks in Aguelhok, considering the domestic turmoil in their home country since Idriss Deby's death and the potential for Chadian troops to

return home to take part in a civil war ([alwihdainfo.com](https://www.alwihdainfo.com/en/20170405-ansar-al-din-leader-killed), April 5). Nevertheless, for the time being, the image of the bearded Ag Albaka's corpse in Aguelhok, released online by journalist Wassim Nasr, remains evidence that, at least on April 2, a major JNIM attack on Chadian-led MINUSMA forces failed ([Twitter.com/SimNasr](https://twitter.com/SimNasr), April 6). The deaths of 40 JNIM fighters, including Ag Albaka, may, in the short-term, limit JNIM's mobility in Aguelhok and reduce Ag Ghaly's influence with his sidekick now eliminated. However, it seems unlikely that the Aguelhok battle alone will become the turning point that MINUSMA needs.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

France Expels Islamic State-Linked Bangladeshi Extremist: Saif al-Rahman

Animesh Roul

In late 2020, French authorities detained Saif Rahman (a.k.a. Totan) a 24-year-old Bangladeshi national, who was attempting to travel to Islamic State (IS)-controlled territory in Syria. During his interrogation, the French authorities uncovered his extremist beliefs and intention to join IS in the Middle East. His social media communications with people involved with the IS group came to light, and French officials concluded that Saif al-Rahman's presence posed a threat to the country, given that he could carry out terrorist attacks on French soil, especially after failing in his attempt to travel to IS strongholds. After a few months in detention, Saif Rahman was deported back to his home country on January 14, 2021. He was arrested on his arrival at Dhaka's Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport ([Daily Star](#), February 5).

The Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) received documentation from the French authorities on Rahman's deportation. According to the CTTC's deputy commissioner, the translated French document confirmed that Rahman had begun planning to join an extremist group in 2019, and in 2020 had attempted to go to Syria and Iraq to join IS. The document also underscored recent jihadist attacks in France, especially the October 16, 2020 knife attack in the northern Paris suburb of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine and the October 29, 2020 attack in Nice ([Prathom Alo](#), February 14). French police feared that Rahman's failed attempt to travel to reach IS in the Middle East

could prompt him to act on IS' calls for lone wolf attacks in France.

Interestingly, Rahman's confession during his interrogation in Dhaka did not match with what his deportation document suggested. He claimed to have contacted IS members in Syria to assist the French government's investigations. Yet French police have verified his independent online activities and found evidence of his links to multiple jihadist groups ([Dainik Amader Shomoy](#), February 3). CTTC officials overseeing the case believed that Rahman is a self-radicalized individual, influenced by online extremist content while in France.

The deportation document did not have any information that he was actually part of any violent conspiracy or planned a violent attack in France. Police are currently conducting a forensic investigation of his electronic devices (cell phone and laptop) and social media handles (e.g. Facebook) to learn more about his contacts with IS. At the same time, Bangladeshi police are trying to find members of IS or any other jihadist groups he may have been associated with—such as the homegrown IS-linked faction Neo-Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (Neo-JMB)—from his devices' contacts lists ([Desh Rupantar](#), January 18).

Saif Rahman is a resident of the Dohar-Nawabganj suburb near the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka and belongs to an educated and well-off family. In February 2015, when Rahman was in his early 20s, he and his mother, Jinat Rahman, moved to France. His father, Lutfar Rahman, has worked at a French university since 2001, and his uncle, Mostafa Rahman, lives in neighboring Italy. After graduating from Dhaka's elite European Standard School and Oxford

International School in 2014, Rahman attended the University of Cergy-Pontoise in France and, after graduating, got a part-time administrative job at the University of the Pantheon (Assas) in Paris ([Bangla Tribune](#), January 18).

CTTC Deputy Commissioner Saiful Islam stated that Saif Rahman tarnished the image of Bangladesh by planning terrorist attacks and trying to join an international terrorist group like IS. Since he intended to disrupt France's security and engaged in jihadist propaganda, his offences are punishable under French anti-terrorism laws. However, despite French investigators' evidence of his jihadist connections, his mother Jinat Rahman (some media sources have given her first name as Jerin) denied that her son held extremist beliefs and said he is a victim of the situation in France and Bangladesh ([Bangladesh Post](#), February 16).

While Jinat Rahman has eluded interrogation from Bangladesh police thus far, she has openly shared her telephone number for interviews ([Benar News](#), February 12). She claims that the French authorities' suspicions started during her and Saif's visa renewal process. Both had applied for 10-year visas. Around that time, new laws were passed in France to "protect secular values," and, following the twin jihadist attacks in October 2020, widespread arrests of suspected extremists began. She told Bengali media that during the visa interview, her son was asked about burning an effigy of Emmanuel Macron during a protest in Dhaka.

In late October 2020, Bangladesh erupted with anti-French and anti-Macron protests. Thousands of Islamists went to the streets, denouncing the display of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in France. The protesters,

led by Islami Andolon Bangladesh (IAB)—a religious/political group that advocates for a caliphate in accordance with Islamic law—carried banners and placards reading "All Muslims of the world, unite" and "Boycott France," burning an effigy of Emmanuel Macron ([New Age](#), October 27, 2020, [Dhaka Tribune](#), October 31, 2020).

Saif Rahman's elite educational background and extremist tendencies are similar to those of the young people who attacked the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka in July 2016. The attackers were Bangladeshi citizens aged 18 to 25. Three of the Holey Artisan attackers -- Nibras Islam, Rohan Imtiaz and Meer Saameh Mubasheer – had affluent social and educational backgrounds, challenging the notions widely in South Asia that "jihadists or extremists always come from poor backgrounds" and "only madrassas breed terrorism and radicalization." These three attackers attended Bangladesh's best English middle schools and expensive private universities with mainstream education curriculums. They seemingly studied the Quran or hadiths in depth ([Daily Star](#), July 3, 2016). Like Saif Rahman, a few of them intended to travel to IS strongholds before they were chosen for the deadly Holey Artisan café violence. This background likely affected French authorities' fear of possible violence by young extremists such as Saif Rahman, resulting in his expulsion from France.

Conclusion

French authorities likely averted a terrorist event by sending Saif Rahman back to Bangladesh. As Bangladeshi authorities now attempt to fathom the extent of Saif Rahman's involvement with IS or the homegrown Neo-JMB organization, this worrying trend of young, educated and

motivated individuals choosing the path of extremism will continue to pose a serious policy problem for Dhaka for years to come.

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Death of Abu Yasser al-Issawi Unlikely to Affect Islamic State Operations in Iraq

Andrew Devereux

On January 28, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi announced that the *wali*, or governor of Islamic State (IS) in Iraq, Abu Yasser al-Issawi, was killed during a security operation. Issawi was assassinated in the Wadi al-Shay valley in southern Kirkuk, an area known for an embedded Islamist presence ([Al-Monitor](#), January 29). Airstrikes hit a network of caves, which the non-state organization was using as a hideout. That was followed by an assault by Iraqi ground forces, according to Sabah al-Numan, a military spokesperson.

The operation was carried out by the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) in coordination with the U.S.-led coalition. Nine other suspected IS terrorists were killed in the operation. The prime minister announced Issawi's death via social media, claiming that he "gave his word to pursue Daesh [Islamic State] terrorists and gave them a thundering response" ([Middle East Eye](#), January 29).

The death of Issawi is the latest development in the fight against IS remnants in Iraq. It is just one of numerous subplots raging in a country beset by political, social and economic crises. Although IS lost its self-proclaimed caliphate in 2017 following a sustained military campaign by domestic and international military actors, the group has resorted to insurgency tactics. Prominent IS commanders like Issawi have ensured the group remains active, if territorially defeated.

The Governor

Kadhimi's combative rhetoric was likely driven by Issawi's senior position within IS. Abu Yasser al-Issawi, born Jabbar Salman Saleh Ali al-Issawi in Fallujah, was the 39-year-old *wali* of IS operations in Iraq, leading a series of divisions, operatives and administrators throughout the country. Little is known about Issawi prior to his involvement in IS activities. According to local counter-terrorism experts, he was highly educated in Quranic studies and subscribed to a radical interpretation of Islam consistent with the beliefs of the Salafist-jihadist group ([Al-Monitor](#), March 1). He allegedly took up arms against the U.S.-led coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003 and was imprisoned in Camp Bucca – an American military encampment where many would-be IS leaders were detained.

Having ascended the IS ranks during its capture of territory in Iraq and Syria following the organization's formal inception in 2013, Issawi's first major positions were as the deputy governor and then governor of northern Baghdad province after the killing of former governor Naji Daoud. Issawi also took responsibility for Salahuddin province before being promoted to the role of governor of Iraqi operations in 2017 ([Arab48](#), January 29). In Iraq, IS has demonstrated a robust hierarchical structure for several years, with the leader of each province responsible for the administration of the organization's activities in that area and reporting to the *wali* – who, up until January 2021, had been Issawi.

Issawi was reportedly well trusted by former IS leader and self-proclaimed “caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Since Baghdadi's death in October 2019, his replacement Abu Ibrahim al-Qurayshi has favored Iraqi nationals in positions of power.

Syrian nationals have reportedly been replaced in the IS top command ([eeradicalization](#), February 15). Issawi's experience and background in Iraq put him in good stead with the new caliph, and it is highly likely he would have been among the favorites to take over the top role if al-Qurayshi was captured or killed.

Prior to becoming the *wali* of Iraq, Issawi was prominently active in the Syrian areas of Hejin and Baghouz, and demonstrated his military prowess by taking part in a reported 200 firefights. The ruthless streak that any IS commander must possess was seen through his involvement in the execution of 18 Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers and targeting of tribes like the Jughayfa and Albu Nimr in western Anbar ([Al-Monitor](#), March 1). The targeting of tribal leaders was a key goal of regional IS leaders during the group's seizure of territory in 2014-2015, ensuring material and tactical support through reprisal attacks. Issawi was at the heart of IS operations in Iraq, but his death is only the latest development in a multitude of ongoing political and military fissures in the country.

Kadhimi's Propaganda Victory

Since assuming office in May 2020, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi has focused on improving safety and security, combating corruption and pushing through government reforms. One of his first acts was to launch a major offensive in Kirkuk in June 2020, targeting IS remnants in the area. Part of his agenda is to re-establish the capabilities of the Iraqi security forces, with the government and military quick to claim that during any tactical operations, such as the successful targeting of IS members, Iraqi forces took the lead and any international

assistance from the U.S.-led coalition was largely material ([Rudaw](#), June 2).

The ability of Kadhimī, his government and the security forces to display these capabilities was punctured by twin bomb blasts in Baghdad on January 21, a week before Issawi was killed. IS claimed responsibility for the attack, in which 32 people were killed when two suicide bombers detonated devices in the Bab al-Sharqi area of central Baghdad ([Arab News](#), January 21). For a government already struggling with the Covid-19 pandemic, internal schisms, and an economic crisis, a resurgence of suicide bombings in the capital, which have reduced in frequency since 2017, was an unwelcome development.

The killing of Issawi gave Kadhimī a more secure basis to declare that the Iraqi security forces are able to identify and eliminate leading IS commanders. Kadhimī had already ordered an overhaul of Iraq's security leadership following the Baghdad bombings, including a new federal police commander and chief of the elite Falcons Unit. The killing of Issawi gave Kadhimī a fresh opportunity to try and secure public trust in the domestic Iraqi forces, especially given the withdrawal of U.S. military assistance ([The Arab Weekly](#), January 22).

There have been numerous reports on the role of the Iraqi intelligence services in identifying, tracking and eliminating Issawi since his death. Kadhimī himself said in his tweet announcing the death of the Iraqi *wali* that it was an intelligence-led operation, with the national Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) and the National Intelligence Service (NIS) at its heart. Both agencies were able to locate Issawi and track him to the Wadi al-Shay valley, and the airstrike that killed Issawi was a joint Iraqi-Coalition operation ([Alaraby](#), February 2).

Kadhimī was handed a further propaganda opportunity when two more IS commanders, Abu Hassan al-Gharibawi, the IS governor of southern Iraq, and Ghanem Sabah Jawad, a known bomb expert, were killed by Iraqi security operations in Abu Ghraib during the week following Issawi's death ([Kurdistan24](#), February 3).

Military Matters

In both sweeps and targeted operations against IS remnants, Kadhimī has relied heavily on the U.S.-trained Counter-Terrorism Service. The CTS answers directly to the prime minister's office and is separate from the Iraqi military's usual chains of command, ensuring a greater level of adherence to Kadhimī's directives. The U.S. withdrawal from combat operations in Iraq has allowed Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to gain greater influence over military matters in the country, with Iraqi lawmakers voting in favor of a massive PMF expansion in April 2021 ([Alaraby](#), April 21).

The CTS and the National Intelligence Service (NIS), which is also led by Kadhimī, are among the last bastions of the military that remain largely free from Iranian infiltration. Previously, units like the PMF, which has ties to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), have clashed with Kadhimī in order to secure political capital, demanding the release of prisoners or allowing the defense budget to be passed only in exchange for greater military influence ([Alaraby](#), July 2 2020). The CTS and NIS are U.S.-aligned agencies that will likely provide Kadhimī with the greatest successes in fighting IS domestically. Further military gains against IS remain a primary path toward building public confidence

in the Iraqi security forces, despite the overt and growing Iranian influence.

IS Without Issawi

Although IS is adept at quickly filling the void created by the capture or killing of its leaders, Issawi's death will doubtless have an impact on IS operations in Iraq, at least in the immediate term. Issawi was a key actor in the group's continued insurgency efforts, in terms of training, recruitment and expanding IS presence from its remote hideouts in the north of the country. Beyond the operational considerations, his death was a symbolic loss for IS: when a high-ranking commander is killed, especially someone of Issawi's position as *de facto* second-in-command, it is a propaganda blow, making it difficult for the IS hierarchy to claim that the group remains strong.

Issawi's replacement will likely be carefully chosen, owing to the prominence of the position and the ongoing favoritism toward Iraqi nationals among the IS hierarchy. Any potential replacement must be someone with sufficient stature, military experience and respect to be seen as a potential caliph. Such IS officials as Bashar Khattab al-Sumaidai, the current head of the IS judiciary, Walid Jassem al-Alwani, a former commander of IS' military council, and Abu Hamzah al-Qurayshi, the official IS spokesman, are likely to be considered, but it is difficult to speculate who the new caliph Abu Ibrahim al-Qurayshi will select to replace Issawi ([eeradicalization](#), February 15).

There has been a notable uptick in attacks by IS remnants in areas northwest of Baghdad, such as Salahuddin and Kirkuk, in the months following Issawi's death. The international coalition's spokesman Colonel Wayne Marotto attempted

to downplay these as "simple low-level attacks," and denied any resurgence, but the attacks highlight the continued capabilities of IS in areas north of Baghdad ([Al-Monitor](#), March 15). Issawi's death is a blow to IS owing to his stature and experience, but as previously seen, the killing of a commander has little impact on operational tempo.

Conclusion

The death of Abu Yasser al-Issawi is undoubtedly a major loss for IS in Iraq, but it will not be the catalyst for the group's eventual defeat. Successors will be found and operations will continue regardless, likely continuing in the same vein of hit-and-run operations executed out of isolated strongholds. The organization is highly unlikely to attempt to reclaim territory or population centers in the coming months. The targeting of IS remnants and the ongoing success of such operations will depend on the outcome of Iraq's ongoing military and political upheavals. The withdrawal of U.S. assistance, the disproportionate influence of Iranian actors and structural weaknesses within Iraq's military could result in less frequent successful operations against IS and allow the terrorist organization to regain a foothold in the country, despite losing its most prominent Iraqi commander.

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Yemen's Houthi Head of Intelligence Abu Ali al-Hakim Wages War in Marib

Rami Jameel

Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim (a.k.a. Abu Ali al-Hakim) is one of the most prominent military leaders of the Yemeni Houthi movement. Since 2011, he led the group in decisive battles that expanded the Houthis' control of the country. Over the past few years, the Shia group went from being a resilient, but isolated, rebellious armed group operating almost exclusively in the Sa'dah province, into an organization that controls the Yemeni capital Sanaa and most of northern and western Yemen. The support the Houthis enjoy from Iran, the main Shia power in the Middle East, has undoubtedly been crucial in their empowerment, but almost all the fighting and field work was done by Yemeni fighters led by loyal and dedicated leaders. Abu Ali al-Hakim is one of the most prominent of those leaders.

Just before the end of its term, the U.S. administration of President Donald Trump designated the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization and sanctioned three of its leaders. Those were the Houthis overall leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi, his brother Abdul Khaliq al-Houthi and Abu Ali al-Hakim ([Treasury.gov](#), January 19). When the Biden administration revoked the designation of the Houthis in a break with the previous administration, it still kept the designation of al-Hakim and the other two leaders ([The Arab Weekly](#), February 13). Al-Hakim is also currently under UN sanctions that were imposed by the security council in November 2014 ([Treasury.gov](#), November 7, 2014).

Early Years

Al-Hakim was born in the mid-1980s in Dehyan, Sa'dah province in northern Yemen near the border with Saudi Arabia. He joined the Houthi movement early in his life. When the Houthi rebellion against the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh broke out for the first time in 2004, the young al-Hakim was on the frontlines. Saleh forces launched a military campaign that was difficult and challenging, but, in the end, resulted in the defeat of the rebels and the death of the founding leader of the Houthi movement, Hussein al-Houthi. Al-Hakim was captured and put in prison in Sanaa. When President Saleh issued an amnesty for the Houthi prisoners, al-Hakim was not included, in a sign of how dangerous he was considered by the government. He was reported to have been responsible for the deaths of 300 Yemeni soldiers ([Hour News](#), April 13, 2014). But when his prison conditions were relaxed and he was allowed a family visit, he seized the opportunity and sneaked out of the prison wearing women's clothes ([Okaz](#), March 6, 2018).

The killing of Hussein al-Houthi was a blow to the group, but it did not kill the movement. [1] The Houthis quickly reorganized themselves and relaunched the rebellion under a new leader, Hussein's brother Abdul Malik al-Houthi. Al-Hakim rejoined the insurrection after fleeing prison and ascended its ranks to become a key military leader. The Yemeni army under President Saleh and his right-hand man General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar launched another five military campaigns against the Houthis in Sa'dah to quell the rebellion. In one of those operations, Operation Scorched Earth in 2009, Saudi forces became involved in the fighting

against the Houthis after the conflict spilled over to Saudi Arabia ([Al Jazeera](#), November 25, 2009). All those operations, known in Yemeni political literature as the ‘Six Wars,’ could not crush the Houthi rebellion. On the contrary, the Houthis, with the significant but still indirect backing of Iran, became a more powerful armed group capable of launching a fully-fledged insurgency.

Uprising and Opportunity

In early 2011, the wave of major political upheaval that was enveloping countries in the Middle East and North Africa reached Yemen. Thousands of Yemenis took to the streets of Sanaa and other cities, calling for the end of 33 years of rule by President Saleh. The Houthis supported the uprising and organized demonstrations in Sa’dah, but quickly turned to violence and seized the whole province ([Alghad](#), November 1, 2014).

Al-Hakim led the operation against the Houthi’s next target. In the 1980s, the Salafist cleric Sheikh Moqbil al-Wada’e founded Dar al-Hadeeth, a religious academy in the Dumaj Vally in the Sa’adah province. Over the years, thousands of Salafist students came to live in Dumaj to study at Dar al-Hadeeth and become clerics. The Salafist interpretation of Islam condemns several aspects of the Shia faith, especially Shias’ traditions of visiting and honoring the shrines of prominent religious figures. The receding power of the central government of President Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi, who succeeded Saleh, made the Houthis attack against the academy almost inevitable. Al-Hakim led the operation, imposing a siege on Dumaj that began in late 2013 and lasted three months. The fighting was severe and hundreds

of people were killed. Finally, in January 2014, the Salafists accepted a ceasefire and submitted to Houthi demands, completely vacating the area ([Al Jazeera](#), January 15, 2014).

After imposing full control on Sa’dah, the Houthi forces, led by al-Hakim, turned to Omran, a neighboring province the group had always operated in, but never fully controlled. The defending force in Omran was Brigade 301 of the Yemeni Army, and a group of fighters aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated al-Islah party. Al-Hakim’s men at this point had become more confident in their fighting ability. They launched more than one attempt to occupy Omran, with the final operation for control taking place in July 2014. Despite coming under arial bombardment during the operation, al-Hakim and his forces successfully occupied Omran city on July 10 after days of heavy fighting ([Al Bayan](#), July 10, 2014). Al-Hakim and the Houthis went on to expand their power over the next several weeks on the whole of Omran province and other parts of Yemen.

Seizing Sanaa

In September 2014, the Houthis secured their greatest victory when they entered and seized control of Sanaa. Former President Saleh maintained his influence over certain parts of the armed forces, but that was not enough to launch his own counterrevolution. Instead, he lent significant support to the Houthi’s operation to take over Sanaa. Commanders loyal to Saleh reportedly did not give their units the order to fight the Houthis, while tribal leaders loyal to the former president fought alongside the rebels when they invaded the city ([Sanaa Online](#), September 22, 2020).

While the Houthis needed the help of other parties to occupy Sanaa, they worked effectively under al-Hakim's leadership to make sure that they alone would control the city and government. Using their control of the capital city, the Houthis began claiming to have official credentials. Al-Hakim was given the rank of a general, although he did not have a career in a conventional, professional military ([Yemen Press](#), December 19, 2015). Subsequently, he was appointed to the position of head of military intelligence, a decision that gave the armed wing of the Houthis control of what was left of the national Yemeni army in Sanaa and other Houthi-controlled areas ([Arabi21](#), August 21, 2017).

A Saudi-led coalition began Operation Decisive Storm, intervening in the conflict, after the Houthis took the port city of Aden in southern Yemen in March 2015. After months of fighting local Yemeni forces supported by the Saudi-led coalition drove the Houthis out of Aden ([Al Arab](#), July 14, 2015). However, neither the coalition nor the anti-Houthi Yemeni forces managed to achieve major victories against the Houthis after that. Al-Hakim and his forces grew stronger and their control over Sanaa and most of northern Yemen remained steady.

In December 2017, Saleh made his last move for control of the country. He turned against the Houthis and tried to start an uprising in Sanaa. The man who helped the Houthis take control of the capital thought that he was ready to remove them, but al-Hakim was prepared for Saleh. He had placed Saleh and his loyalists under strict surveillance and when the former president signaled that he was about to move against the Houthis, al-Hakim issued a clear warning to him to cease his activities.

Nevertheless, Saleh went on with his attempt to take back power, but al-Hakim's forces were able to capture and kill Saleh on December 4, 2017 ([Al Jazeera](#), December 4, 2017).

Last Battle?

The conflict might soon be coming to an end, especially with Saudi Arabia's recent apparent admission that the initial goal of removing the Houthis from power is unrealistic. However, no clear political path for peace or a ceasefire has yet been agreed upon. Without a clear process for deescalating the conflict, the Houthis decided to launch another campaign led by al-Hakim to occupy the oil rich province of Marib. The operation started in February and is still ongoing at the time of writing ([Al Quds](#), April 25).

After the first Houthi attempt to take Marib did not succeed in February, media organizations controlled by Saudi Arabia and other opponents of al-Hakim began to repost past reports that mocked al-Hakim as an uneducated person who was made a general despite his lack of credentials. These media organizations do not, however, seem to be interested in explaining how he managed to win so many battles and maintain the Houthi's control of areas so far from their stronghold in Sa'dah. Another trend in the propaganda war against al-Hakim included reports claiming that he was removed from leadership and punished for not succeeding to overrun Marib ([Yemen Voice](#), April 5). Attempts to undermine al-Hakim are a reminder of how the Houthi's opponents underestimated the group's power in the early stages of the conflict in Yemen. That failure to properly assess the ability of the Houthis led to greater conflict in the country.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, another attempt by the Houthis to take Marib is ongoing. Even if they do not manage to fulfill their goal, they are still the most organized power in Yemen and their control of Sanaa and the most populous parts of Yemen remain undisputed. The Houthis seem to be well positioned to maintain their influence, if not expand it, after the war. Al-Hakim would likely take a central role in the Houthi's attempt at further expansion. Al-Hakim and the Houthis, however, face the thorny problem of being under UN and U.S. sanctions. The world might deal with the Houthi leaders as the *de facto* rulers of parts of Yemen, but being under sanction will complicate a peace process involving their integration into an internationally-recognized government. Their violation of international resolutions and their radical anti-Western and antisemitic ideology will always mean that the Western powers will not accept them as legitimate members of the international community. But the Houthis seem to be interested in remaining the main power on the ground in Yemen and perhaps nominate less significant figures to occupy official positions, a pattern that has precedent in countries like Lebanon, where another Shia organization, namely Hezbollah, have more power than its representatives in government.

The war in Yemen is not over yet. As long as al-Hakim is alive and in a senior position in the Houthi movement, he will always play a role in both the military campaigns, like in Marib now, and in maintaining the Houthi's power over the communities in Sanaa and elsewhere as part of his position as head of intelligence.

Notes

[1] Hussein al-Houthi was a member of the Yemeni parliament in the 1990s. He was the son of a prominent Zaidi Shia cleric. The Zaidi strand of Shia Islam is different than the more popular Twelver branch of Shi'ism, which has substantial followers in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and other parts of the Middle East. However, Hussein al-Houthi became influenced by Iran and its Shia Islamist anti-Western ideology when he founded his group which was first called al-Shabab al-Mo'min (The Faithful Youth) and later Ansarullah (Supporters of God). The Houthis are still Zaidis despite including more Twelver Shia's notions in their religious practices. The more significant transformation is that they completely embraced the political ideology of Iran and its anti-Western axis in the Middle East.

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