



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

BRIEF

JOHN FOULKES

Terrorist-Turned-Pilot: A Profile of al-Shabab's Rashid Mwalimu

SUNGUTA WEST

'Creating Anarchy in the Country': TLP's New Challenges Under Saad Hussain Rizvi

SYED FAZL-E-HAIDER

Hazara Militia Leader Abdul Ghani Alipoor Emerges as Counter-Weight to Taliban and Islamic State

SUDHA RAMACHANDRAN

An In-Depth Portrait of a Pakistani Taliban Founding Father: Umar Khalid Khurasani

ABDUL SAYED

VOLUME XII, ISSUE 5 | May 2021

Iran's Man in Nineveh: Waad Qado and the PMF's 30th Brigade

John Foulkes

On May 12, the U.S. Department of State released its annual report on International Religious Freedom. Though the report drew media attention for calling out abuses of religious freedom from geopolitical rivals to the United States, including Russia and China, what received less attention was the section detailing ongoing abuses in the areas of northern Iraq currently under the control of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Specifically, the 30th Brigade of the PMF, led by Waad Qado, was repeatedly referenced as an oppressive force in the areas it occupies ([state.gov](https://www.state.gov), May 12).

Qado, a.k.a. Abu Jaafar al-Shabaki, and his PMF brigade have frequently been cited for carrying out human rights abuses, with the militant leader being sanctioned by the U.S. government for this reason on July 18, 2019 ([treasury.gov](https://www.treasury.gov), July 18, 2019). The 30th Brigade's presence in the Nineveh Plains of Iraq, which lies to the east and

northeast of Mosul, continues to cause tension with local citizens and is delaying the reconstruction of the area following the Islamic State's (IS) occupation and the subsequent campaign against the terrorist group.

Little is known of Qado's background before the formation of the 30th Brigade, which is also known as Liwa al-Shabak. The brigade was organized by the Badr Organization—one of the largest and most influential groups within the PMF umbrella—and formally announced its founding on November 23, 2014. Upon their founding, the group was estimated to include approximately 500 fighters, who took part in operations against IS in northern Iraq. The group swelled from 1,000 to as many as 1,500 fighters after the 30th Brigade and the PMF began their occupation of the region ([Jihadology](https://www.jihadology.com), January 15, 2015; [Mideast Center](https://www.mideastcenter.org), October 5). The Badr Organization created the group, under the PMF umbrella, by recruiting Shia Shabaks, an ethnic minority from the Nineveh Plains region that speak a dialect of Kurdish. The 30th Brigade continues today to act as an auxiliary force to large Shia PMF militias, namely the

Badr Organization. Once the 30th Brigade moved into the Nineveh Plains in 2017, they began recruiting local Shabaks to assist in sweep up operations against IS and provide security to the area ([Al Jazeera](#), May 8).

The 30th Brigade controls most of the Nineveh Plains, with their forces based in the formerly Christian-majority city of Batella. The PMF 50th Brigade also occupies a portion of the plains. The 30th's forces are also concentrated in Hamdaniah, Telkaif, and Bashiqa ([Al Jazeera](#), May 8). Many of the local Christians fled the area during IS' advance, and have largely not yet returned due to the militia group's predatory practices. As recorded in the State Department's recent report, members of the 30th Brigade have been recorded as harassing the local Christian minority, and accuses the militia of making "demographic changes by facilitating and giving permission to Arab and Shabak Shia to move into Christian areas in the [Nineveh] Plain, while Christians refused to return to the area because they feared these forces" ([state.gov](#), May 12).

Furthermore, Qado's 30th Brigade remains in control of the main trade highway connecting Mosul and Erbil, providing them a lucrative source of income through illegal checkpoints, from which they collect highway tolls and bribes. Despite orders from then-Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to vacate the area in August 2018, the PMF continues to operate in the region. The prior Iraqi Prime Minister, Abdil Abdul-Mahdi, also attempted to end unauthorized security operations and economic activities by PMF militias in Mosul and the Nineveh Plains in 2019, without success. ([Kurdistan24](#), August 6, 2019).

The region overseen by the 30th Brigade has been a hotspot in tensions within Iraq. On

September 30, 2020, six rockets were fired at the international airport in Erbil, in the Kurdistan Region from the Nineveh Plain area controlled by the brigade. The airport is used by American and coalition forces, as well as by commercial flights ([Mideast Center](#), October 5). Kurdish officials claimed that PMF forces were responsible for the attack. A senior commander within the 30th Brigade stated that the rocket launcher used in the attack was found 1,200 meters from a PMF checkpoint, in an area that is a no-man's land between PMF and Kurdish Peshmerga forces. However, Kurdish officials have stated that the rockets were launched from an area between Sheikh Amir and Tarjala villages, which is firmly in territory controlled by the brigade ([Rudaw](#), October 10, 2020).

On April 14, a rocket attack on a Turkish military base in the Bashiqa region near Mosul killed a Turkish soldier ([Al Jazeera](#), May 8). Turkish media was quick to point the finger at the PMF, quoting the deputy governor of Ninevah, Rifaat Smo, who stated, "The missile launch pads that targeted the Turkish military base were found between the areas of Shalalat and Baaweza in the territory of the Hashd [PMF] Brigade 30" ([The Jerusalem Post](#), April 18).

On the same day as the attack on the Turkish base, a drone filled with TNT attacked a U.S. base in Erbil. The attack was claimed by a largely unknown organization, al-Sabiqoon, which is believed to be an Iranian-backed militia that was created to give the PMF deniability in attacks on American bases. Potentially in retaliation for the drone attack, the 30th Brigade, occupying the border region near the Kurdistan Region, experienced an assault by Kurdish Peshmerga forces the next day, April 15. Peshmerga forces launched a guided missile and

fired a short barrage of small-arms fire on the brigade's position ([The National News](#), April 15).

The Nineveh region, largely occupied by the 30th Brigade, remains at the center of tensions between the United States, Turkey and Iran. As recent incidents have shown, the Shabak militia units are on the frontlines of tensions in the region. The territory they occupy has emerged as a source of attacks on U.S. and Turkish positions—even though the attacks are likely to be carried out by other groups less obviously linked to Iran. Likewise, the 30th Brigade faces the risk of being the target of future retaliatory strikes by organizations or states attempting to inflict punishment on the PMF for their irregular attacks.

In the middle of all of this is the brigade's mysterious leader, Waad Qado. Backed by Iran and originally sponsored by the Iranian-backed Badr Organization, he is overseeing human rights abuses against local Christians, and likely attempting to change the demographics in Nineveh for the gains of the Shia Shabak who make up his fighting force. Waad Qado is the PMF and Iran's man on the ground in Nineveh, as his forces continue to occupy a pivotal position that could be the site of future crises between the Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government, Turkey, Iran and the United States.

John Foulkes is the Editor of Militant Leadership Monitor

Terrorist-Turned-Pilot: A Profile of al-Shabab's Rashid Mwalimu

Sunguta West

In March, Kenyan security agencies issued an alert for the arrest of Rashid Mwalimu, an allegedly armed and dangerous pilot linked to al-Shabaab, the Somali-based al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa. According to the police, Mwalimu was planning terrorist strikes in Kenya as revenge for the ongoing military airstrikes against the jihadist group in southern Somalia. Continuous attacks on al-Shabaab's bases have killed some of the top leaders of the militant group, the deadliest in Africa. Kenyan security agencies urged citizens to provide any information or report any sightings of Mwalimu ([Kenyans.co.ke](#), March 30).

The uncovering of a terrorist who would target the aviation industry appeared to fit within the group's plan to train pilots. The main objective behind al-Shabaab equipping some of its fighters with aviation skill stems from the group's interest in advancing the organization's capabilities and avenging the deaths of its leaders—including top and middle level commanders—who have been killed in U.S. and allied airstrikes in Somalia. The trained pilots would allegedly take actions beyond Somalia and target the international aviation industry ([Nation](#) , March 31; [The Star](#), March 30).

Mwalimu, a Kenyan, was recruited into al-Shabaab in 2015 alongside Cholo Abdi Abdulla, who is now in U.S. custody, and Salim Gichunge Osman, a.k.a. Faruq, who led the attack on the DusitD2 hotel complex in Nairobi on January 15, 2019. During their training in southern Somalia, the two met another future DusitD2 attacker,

Osman Gedi. Both Osman and Gedi were killed during the assault.

In Somalia, Mwalimu, Abdulla and Osman were quickly recruited into Amniyat, the intelligence wing of al-Shabaab. Mwalimu and Cholo reportedly became close friends during training and later activities within al-Shabaab. Together, the terrorists allegedly carried out numerous attacks in Somalia and Kenya before being sent to Boni Forest, which straddles the Kenyan-Somali border. ([Standard](#) , March 21).

Mwalimu and Abdulla were active in the forest in 2015 and 2016, where they carried out numerous attacks using improvised explosive devices (IED) ([The Star](#), March 30). However, their activities there did not last long. Mwalimu and Abdulla were deemed to have a higher level of education than other al-Shabaab fighters in the area, and so the two were selected for specialized training as pilots. They were instructed to acquire all the skills necessary to fly planes, learn how to hijack them and use them to conduct terrorist attacks ([Nation](#), March 21).

Al-Shabaab sent Mwalimu and Abdulla to an aviation institution in the Philippines known as the All-Ais Aviation Academy to gain the necessary skills to be a pilot. Mwalimu was also allocated a large amount of money from al-Shabaab accounts, which allowed him to travel as a tourist to multiple destinations. The militant group allegedly procured first-class tickets for Mwalimu and Abdulla so that the two could surveil and learn the security methods surrounding the cockpits of the planes.

Contrary to al-Shabaab's radical adherence to Quranic teachings, the group encouraged Mwalimu and Abdulla to drink alcohol and engage in promiscuous behavior as a means of fitting in while studying in the Philippines. Mwalimu and Abdulla reportedly accidentally

leaked information about their operation to Mwalimu's girlfriend, blowing their cover ([The Star](#), March 30).

Abdulla was arrested in 2019 in the Philippines on local charges and in 2020 was transferred to the United States, where he was indicted for conspiring to hijack a plane for al-Shabaab ([justice.gov](#), December 16, 2020). He faces six counts of terrorism charges, including conspiring to hijack planes to carry out attacks similar to the September 11, 2001 attack in New York ([The Standard](#), March 21, 2020).

While Abdulla was arrested, Mwalimu managed to escape, ending his training early and fleeing to Somalia. But reports indicate that by the time he left the Philippines, Mwalimu had already acquired the necessary expertise to fly a plane. According to reports, he had already completed the training and could fly and land planes, and handle the vehicle's mechanical applications. The only thing he did not acquire was an international flying license, unnecessary for a terrorist attack, according to security analysts ([The Star](#), March 30).

At the moment, the militant is believed to be holed up in Somalia, where he is believed to be planning future attacks.

Recently, al-Shabaab has shown greater interest in attacking aviation installations. Reports also indicate that it possesses a variety of weapons, including small arms, mortars, rockets and anti-aircraft weapons capable of striking low-flying planes ([The East African](#), March 2). On January 5, 2020, al-Shabaab attacked Camp Simba in Manda Bay in Kenya's coastal area, destroying multiple aircraft. In Somalia, it raided civil aviation installations, including the Aden Adde International Airport.

These attacks on civil aviation installations indicate that al-Shabaab could continue to target

such areas, and Mwalimu could play a role in such operations.

Sunguta West is an independent journalist based in Nairobi.

‘Creating Anarchy in the Country’: The TLP’s New Challenges Under Saad Hussain Rizvi

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

Saad Hussain Rizvi is the *emir*, or chairman, of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a right-wing politico-religious party, which Pakistani authorities banned in April under the country’s anti-terrorism laws. In November 2020, Saad Rizvi succeeded his father Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi in the post. Khadim Rizvi was a firebrand cleric, who founded the TLP in 2015 mainly to defend the country’s blasphemy laws. Khadim Rizvi was an anti-blasphemy activist and campaigned for and organized the TLP around that central issue ([The News](#), November 21, 2020).

Background

Before rising to become the TLP’s *emir*, the 26-year-old Saad Rizvi served as the party’s deputy secretary general. Saad studied at his father’s Abuzar Ghaffari madrassa, where he was the student of Islamist jurisprudence and the Quran. Mainstream media in Pakistan had not given prominent coverage to TLP leader Khadim Rizvi’s speeches and events, in which he criticized the leadership of various political parties and news organizations in Pakistan. Saad notably oversaw the party’s expansion on social media, increasing its presence online to propagate the speeches of his father Khadim Rizvi. Saad Rizvi taught the students of the madrassas how to use Twitter and considered the microblogging site an important platform for projecting the TLP’s message ([Samaa tv](#), April 12).

Following His Father's Legacy

Allama Rizvi died on November 19, 2020. He had reportedly been ill and was experiencing difficulty breathing along with a fever beginning the day before his death. Tens of thousands of people gathered in Lahore for his funeral. Thousands of his followers vowed to carry forward Rizvi's mission under his son and successor Saad Rizvi. The TLP's *Shura* (advisory body) elected Saad Rizvi as the party's chief immediately after his father's death. Saad Rizvi had been regularly seen at his father's sit-ins in Islamabad and other areas of the country, where he protested any proposal to change the country's blasphemy law. Days before his death, Khadim Rizvi held a protest demanding the closure of the French embassy and the expulsion of France's ambassador from Pakistan ([Dawn](#), November 21, 2020).

To end the TLP's mass protests in November, the Pakistani government reached an agreement with Allama Khadim Rizvi on November 16, just a few days before his death. Under the agreement, the government promised to reach a decision by February 16 in parliament on deporting the French ambassador, cutting ties with France and boycotting French goods. The government also agreed to not appoint a new ambassador to Paris and to release all of the TLP supporters who were arrested during the November demonstrations. These two components of the agreement were immediately carried out. The deadline was extended to April 20 following a request from the government, which was accepted by the TLP. However, Saad Rizvi and the party were preparing to launch nationwide protests if this deadline was not met ([Quora TV](#), April 12).

“Creating Anarchy in the Country”

Before the TLP could begin these protests, police preemptively arrested Saad Rizvi on April 12. He had released a video message that day calling on TLP supporters to mobilize and prepare to demonstrate, which immediately prompted his arrest ([ThePrint.in](#), April 20). The mass protests supporting the anti-blasphemy laws squarely placed Saad within his father's legacy. The demonstrations that resulted from his arrest caused a notable breakdown of law and order in most of Pakistan's major cities. Normal life and business activities were brought to a grinding halt, as major roads and highways were blocked by TLP supporters ([Dawn](#), April 12).

According to a senior police official, Saad Rivzi was detained as a “preemptive measure” to “maintain law and order,” following his call for new marches to force the expulsion of the French ambassador in protest over the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*'s publication of blasphemous caricatures last September ([Dawn](#), April 12). The TLP's success in blocking roads and damaging public property across the country was widely viewed as embarrassing for the Pakistani government. Several policemen were killed, abducted and brutally beaten by TLP protesters during the violent demonstrations. Eleven police officers were taken hostage and over 580 were injured ([ThePrint.in](#), April 20). Three TLP workers were also killed in clashes with the police during a countrywide crackdown on the activists ([Dawn](#), April 18).

In response to the mass protests, on April 15, the government, led by Prime Minister Imran Khan, banned the TLP under its anti-terrorism laws. The government declared that it had “reasonable grounds to believe that the [TLP] is engaged in terrorism...” and that the party was “involved in creating anarchy in the

country...” ([Dawn](#), April 15). The move came after the country's National Counter Terrorism Authority (Nacta) and other security organizations designated the TLP as a terrorist organization ([The News](#), April 16). After imposing the ban, the government expressed plans to disband the TLP, filing a suit in the country's top court for the dissolution of the Islamist party ([Express Tribune](#), April 19).

On April 17, Pakistani authorities placed Saad Rizvi on the fourth schedule of the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA). This action froze all of Rizvi's assets. His national identity card has been blocked and he is no longer able to conduct any bank transactions or sell or purchase any property. The government's notification asked him to turn in his original passport to the police ([Geo TV](#) April 17, 2021).

The demonstrations ended after the Pakistani government again accepted the group's key demands, including submitting for debate in parliament a resolution calling for the expulsion of the French envoy and the release of Saad Rizvi ([Dawn](#), April 20; [Dawn](#), April 20). Rizvi, upon release, announced an end to the protests across the country ([Express Tribune](#), April 20). Islamabad, however, refused to lift the ban on the TLP.

The government actually tried to tackle the new TLP's leadership with force but its strategy backfired and the government had to accept the TLP's demands. For Saad Rizvi, it is an uphill battle to replace his father or copy the unique style of Allama Rizvi.

Just a few months after taking over the TLP leadership, Saad is confronting enormous challenges, including the TLP's survival after being declared a proscribed organization.

Barelvi School of Islamic Thought

The TLP belongs to the Barelvi school of Islamic thought, a Sunni Sufi revivalist movement within Hanafi Islam, though it follows an extremist interpretation. The party emerged in the 2018 elections as the most committed and militant of the Barelvi politico-religious parties and fielded candidates all over the country. Before the emergence of the TLP, only two parties represented the Barelvis—Sunni Tehreek (ST) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP). With his charisma, aggressive style and fiery speeches, Allama Rizvi quickly attracted people from all sections of society. He aggressively protested perceived disrespect to the Prophet of Islam committed on numerous occasions, notably following the October 2018 acquittal of Asia Bibi, the Pakistani Christian who was charged with blasphemy and freed, sparking massive protests. ([Samaa tv](#) April 12).

Conclusion

For Saad Rizvi, the challenge on the political front is even bigger, as he has to prepare for the next elections and mobilize the Barelvi vote all over the country. In the 2018 election, the TLP received 2.2 million votes, the fifth largest number. Despite substantial support at the polls, no TLP candidates won a seat in the National Assembly. It emerged as Pakistan's third largest party, with 1.9 million votes in Punjab alone, the country's largest province ([The News](#), July 30, 2018). However, the mayhem unleashed on Pakistani roads and streets by party activists in April damaged the TLP's image at home and abroad.

People in Pakistan are currently struggling to earn a living amid skyrocketing commodity prices and mounting poverty levels in the cash-strapped country. Economic opportunities are limited to begin with, and the actions of TLP

protestors or those from other political or religious parties have often temporarily shut down the major cities, further damaging business. The violent protests are bound to erode popular support for the TLP in the 2023 elections.

"Blasphemy will never be tolerated," said Saad Rizvi in his first address as *emir* of TLP ([Urdu Point](#), November 21, 2020).

Blasphemy has long been a highly sensitive issue in Pakistan. Under the law, showing disrespect to the prophet of Islam or desecrating the Quran is a capital offence punishable by death. As demonstrated in the recent protests and the 2018 election, the TLP has millions of supporters and, despite the death of its founder Khadim Rizvi, it continues to demonstrate considerable street power and mobility in its cause of defending blasphemy laws. Saad Rizvi and his party's actions in April shutdown many of the major cities in the country, providing the TLP *emir* a platform to continue his father's legacy. Whether or not that will maintain, contract or expand the popular support for the TLP's cause is now up to Saad Rizvi.

Syed Fazl-e-Haider is a contributing analyst at the South Asia desk of Wikistrat. He is a freelance columnist and the author of several books including the Economic Development of Balochistan (2004). He has contributed articles and analysis to a range of publications including Dawn, The Express Tribune, Asia Times, The National (UAE), Foreign Affairs, Daily Beast, New York Times, Gulf News, South China Morning Post, and The Independent.

Hazara Militia Leader Abdul Ghani Alipoor Emerges as Counter-Weight to Taliban and Islamic State Forces in Behsud

Sudha Ramachandran

Introduction

Around midnight on March 18, an Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) helicopter was shot down in the Behsud district of Afghanistan's central Maidan Wardak province. Nine military personnel, including the pilot, were killed in the attack. The Afghan Ministry of Defense blamed the attack on Abdul Ghani Alipoor's "militia" and promised to avenge the attack ([Tolo News](#), March 20). Alipoor claimed responsibility for bringing down the chopper, but subsequently denied involvement in the incident ([Tolo News](#), April 4). Military operations were launched soon after to capture Alipoor ([Khaama Press](#), March 22). However, he remains elusive.

Also known as "Qomandan Shamsheer" (or Commander Sword), Abdul Ghani Alipoor is of ethnic Shia Hazara origin. His militia of Hazara fighters was reportedly set up to defend their community against the Taliban and Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), the local affiliate of the global jihadist group ([Tolo News](#), March 21). So why is the Afghan government, which is also fighting the Taliban and IS-K, opposed to Alipoor?

Growing Threat

Little is known of Alipoor's early background. He was reportedly a commander in the Abdul Ali Mazari faction of the Hizb-e-Wahdat-e-Islami Afghanistan, which was an armed group

of Hazaras that formed during the Soviet occupation of the country. When the Hamid Karzai government initiated a program for disbandment of illegal armed groups in 2004, Alipoor surrendered his weapons and worked as a driver on the Kabul-Behsud route ([Tolo News](#), March 21). Taliban attacks on Hazaras and clashes between Hazaras and the nomadic Kochis in Behsud and Daimirdad districts reportedly prompted him to pick up arms again in 2014. The following year, he set up the Jabha-ye Moqawamat (Resistance Force), a “public uprising force” of around 150 men. This group is said to be active in Ghor, Daikundi, Ghazni and Maidan Wardak provinces, where it supports locals against Taliban abductions and attacks ([Tolo News](#), November 27, 2018). The group has also engaged in violence against unarmed people—for instance, abducting and beating people ([Pajhwok](#), June 23, 2020).

In November 2018, Afghan intelligence officials arrested Alipoor in Kabul for running an illegal militia, attacking security forces, engaging in extortion and blackmail and arming criminals ([The Hindu](#), December 1, 2016). His arrest triggered demonstrations, where protestors called for his release. Violent clashes broke out between his supporters and the police in several cities, including Kabul, Bamiyan and Mazar-e-Sharif ([Tolo News](#), November 25, 2018). The violence forced the government to free him two days later ([Tolo News](#), November 27, 2018).

In the years since, clashes between Alipoor’s fighters and Afghan security forces have grown in frequency and intensity of violence. His militia is said to have carried out several attacks on ANDSF checkpoints in Behsud district ([Ariana News](#), September 6, 2020). At the end of January, Alipoor’s fighters clashed with police over the appointment of new police

commanders in Behsud district ([Tolo News](#), February 3). Six weeks later, his militia shot down the military helicopter, its most audacious attack on the state to date.

Threat to Afghan Security

Alipoor has many critics in Afghanistan. Afghan journalist Sami Yousafzai describes him as “a threat to Afghanistan’s security and national unity.” He has directed violent attacks against the Kochis, a nomadic Ghilji Pashtun community that visits the Hazara-dominated areas in the central highlands during the summer months, Yousafzai said, adding that such attacks strain relations between ethnic groups and “weaken national unity.” Importantly, Alipoor has “challenged the writ of the Afghan state,” Yousafzai said. The threat Alipoor poses to state security is augmented by “his links with foreign powers like Iran,” claimed Yousafzai. [1] According to intelligence reports cited in the Afghan media, the missile that brought down the military helicopter was provided by Iran ([Afghanistan Times](#), May 25).

In addition, according to Yousafzai, Alipoor has links with the Fatemiyoun Brigade, [2] an Iranian-backed militia of Shia Hazara fighters that Tehran deployed in the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars to promote its interests. With the war in Syria winding down, Fatemiyoun fighters have been returning home to Afghanistan in recent years, raising concern over their possible use by Iran to further its interests in Afghanistan. Such concerns surged last December, when Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif offered the Afghan government use of the Fatemiyoun to fight the IS-K in Afghanistan ([Terrorism Monitor](#), March 26). Iran is using Fatemiyoun and Alipoor to “openly interfere in Afghan affairs,” Yousafzai said, pointing out that Alipoor has not denied links with the country. [3]

An Exaggerated Threat?

According to an Afghan security official, “Alipoor and his fighters were initially not seen as a major challenge to the writ of the state.” Though “many warlords from other ethnic groups” were active in the country, Alipoor was pursued by the security forces to demonstrate that the establishment was not targeting warlords from just one or two ethnic groups, but across the board. It was only after the recent shooting down of the military helicopter that Alipoor has become “a potential threat to national security.” [4]

According to a Hazara official based in India, Alipoor and his fighters are “being targeted by the Pashtun-dominated political establishment.” This is “simply a continuation of the centuries-old ethnic conflict in Afghanistan,” in which all ethnic groups banded together in their persecution of Hazaras, he said. [5] By linking Alipoor to Iran and the Fatemiyoun, the Afghan establishment is painting him to be “an enemy deserving of the wrath of the establishment,” the security official said, pointing out that this provides “the easiest justification,” for state action against him. [6]

Support of Hazaras

Alipoor enjoys strong support in the Hazara community. According to the Hazara official, many Hazaras see Alipoor as a “guardian,” someone who “has stepped in to protect them against the Taliban and the IS-K.” [6] Mostly Shia in a country that is predominantly Sunni Muslim, Hazaras have been persecuted in Afghanistan for centuries. Their Asian features makes them easily identifiable and targets of attack. Hazaras suffered horrific violence at the hands of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hizb-e-Islami, the Taliban and, in more recent years, IS-K. In

1998, after taking control of Mazar-e-Sharif, the Taliban systematically massacred thousands of Hazaras living there ([Al Jazeera](#), June 27, 2016). While the number of attacks by the Taliban against Hazaras were reduced in the decade after it lost power in Kabul, such violence has surged again in recent years ([Tolo News](#), December 27, 2016).

IS-K is targeting the Hazara too: in November 2015, the Sunni extremist group beheaded seven members of the community. It has carried out innumerable attacks on education centers, schools and maternity hospitals in Hazara-dominated neighborhoods of Kabul, as well ([Gandhara](#), May 8).

Feelings of anger and apprehension are common among Hazaras over these attacks. The Ghani government has “not been able to prevent these attacks, even in tightly guarded Kabul,” the Hazara official pointed out. In these circumstances, Hazaras, especially in the “more remote villages and districts are turning to Alipoor to secure them.” Young Hazara men are joining his group in “growing numbers” as they “want to protect their family and people against the Taliban and IS-K,” he observed. [7]

Response to Alipoor’s Call to Arms

This trend can be expected to grow in the coming months. U.S. soldiers are scheduled to exit Afghanistan by September and violence in the country is widely predicted to intensify, if not completely descend into civil war. Hazaras are apprehensive that, as in previous phases of the Afghan civil war, they will again be massacred by armed groups ([Salaam Times](#), February 9). Such apprehensions have grown in the wake of the suicide attack on May 8 at the Sayed al-Shuhada school for girls in Kabul’s Dasht-e-Barchi locality, a predominantly Hazara neighborhood.

Additionally, Hazara anger with the Afghan state has grown in recent months, especially with the Ghani government opting for military operations to capture Alipoor. It has evoked sympathy for him among the Hazaras in Behsud. [8] The operations have resulted in several civilian casualties, potentially pushing more Hazara youth to heed Alipoor's call to arms.

Notes

[1] Author's Interview, Kabul-based Afghan journalist, Sami Yousafzai, May 19.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Author's Interview, Kabul-based Afghan security official, May 20.

[5] Author's Interview, Afghan student of Hazara ethnic origin studying in India, May 25.

[6] Security official, n. 4.

[7] Hazara official, n. 5.

[8] Ibid.

An In-Depth Portrait of a Pakistani Taliban Founding Father: Umar Khalid Khurasani

Abdul Sayed

In August 2020, eight important Pakistani jihadist groups opposed to Islamabad joined the Pakistani Taliban, known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Among them was an influential group led by Commander Umar Khalid Khurasani, a.k.a. Abdul Wali Mohmand. The TTP chief, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, declared that Khurasani's return to TTP marked the beginning of a new era for the group ([Umar Media](#), August 18, 2020). Khurasani has had quite an influential role in the rise of anti-state jihadism in Pakistan and is a founding figure within the TTP. [1] He is one of the most influential anti-state Pakistani jihadist commanders currently operating in the country.

Khurasani is the only TTP commander currently on the U.S. Reward for Justice list. The United States is offering \$3.5 million for information that leads to his arrest or killing ([Reward For Justice](#)). All previous TTP commanders on this list have been killed in U.S. drone strikes. [2] Khurasani has survived multiple drone strikes and several raids conducted by U.S., Afghan and Pakistani forces. He remains an influential name among anti-state jihadists in Pakistan ([The Express Tribune](#), October 16, 2017).

This article looks at Khurasani's biography, which reveals crucial complexities in the jihadist landscape of Pakistan and its implications for Afghanistan's security environment.

Pro-State to Anti-State Jihadism

Khurasani started his jihadist career from a state-loyal Pakistani jihadist group, Harakat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) in 1996. [3] HuM was founded in the 1980s to support the Afghan jihadists in their fight against Soviet forces. [4] HuM quickly became an ally of the Afghan Taliban after its emergence, assisting in the group's expansion by providing trained, devoted soldiers from Pakistan. Under HuM, Khurasani fought in Afghanistan in 2000 to defend the Taliban regime in Kabul. HuM and its members also became close to al-Qaeda during this period, which later influenced the group's members. After 9/11, HuM fighters would go on to play a substantial role for al-Qaeda in Pakistan. [5]

Khurasani soon became a trusted subordinate to the HuM chief, Maulana Fazal-ur-Rehman Khalil, who appointed him as the HuM emir of his native Mohmand tribal agency. [6] Khalil trusted Khurasani as his guide through the Tora Bora mountains in late 2001, where he headed for an important secret meeting with Bin Laden. [7] This was a crucial period for Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda, as the group fought for its survival while surrounded by U.S. forces and its Afghan allies.

Khurasani shifted his militant adventurism from Afghanistan to Kashmir after 9/11, where he was appointed to a HuM training camp, where he oversaw the group's presence in the Pakistani side of Kashmir in 2003. [8] The Pakistani President, General Pervez Musharraf, initiated a peace process with India in the same year, which resulted in a ban on the jihadist groups based on the Pakistani side of Kashmir. [9] These jihadist organizations were already profoundly hurt by the state's post-9/11 policies of supporting the United States in its Global War on Terrorism, which they considered to be a betrayal of their ideological brethren in Afghanistan. These

Pakistani state restrictions on the Kashmiri jihadist groups further fueled their anger against the state.

Khurasani was one of the hundreds of jihadists—infuriated by the government tightening its policies toward the insurgents—who ended up in al-Qaeda-run training camps in Waziristan. [10] Al-Qaeda prepared these frustrated jihadists for its future war in Pakistan, which would eventually lead to the creation of TTP.

Founding Role in TTP

Khurasani spent only a few months in Waziristan, taking part in attacks against U.S.-allied forces in the neighboring Afghan province of Paktia and fostering new relationships with other militants. He befriended the TTP's future founder, Bait Ullah Mehsud, and joined his network, called the 'Bait Ullah Mehsud Caravan.' This was a small group of Bait Ullah loyalists, limited in reach to South Waziristan, who provided shelter to al-Qaeda and its jihadist allies and participated in attacks against U.S.-allied forces in Afghanistan. Khurasani pledged allegiance to Bait Ullah, who appointed him to the position of emir, responsible for his native Mohmand agency, where he was once responsible for HuM operations as that group's local leader. [11] Along with carrying out a career as an insurgent, Khurasani also worked as a journalist for a national Pakistani newspaper in his native Mohmand agency ([Dawn](#), February 8, 2015).

Unlike other, short-term thinking TTP commanders, Khurasani established that he had broad, long-term goals for fighting in Pakistan, including by taking the fight beyond the tribal belt. This is evident by his founding role in establishing a countrywide united jihadist front, which later emerged as the TTP organization. Khurasani was the first person to suggest that the Bait Ullah Mehsud Caravan should be expanded

to all of the tribal areas and into other Pakistani provinces to establish a strong front against the state. [12]

For this purpose, he first convinced jihadist commanders from the areas neighboring Mohmand, including Bajaur, Swat, Buner, and Malakand areas, to join the group. Khurasani then sent a delegation to other tribal agencies to meet with various jihadist groups, convincing them to join a united jihadist organization. In these meetings, Khurasani suggested that Bait Ullah be the leader of the umbrella organization. All these efforts ultimately resulted in the establishment of TTP at the end of December 2007 in Waziristan ([Umar Media](#), 2012).

A central point of the new TTP organization's guidelines to local commanders was to stop the activities of jihadist insurgent groups that were in support of the Pakistani state and not allow any such group to join TTP. [13] Following these instructions, Khurasani eliminated a major Salafist-jihadist group that was using Mohmand agency as a staging ground to operate in the neighboring province of Kunar, Afghanistan against U.S.-allied forces ([The Express Tribune](#), September 21, 2010). Tensions between Khurasani and the Salafist-jihadists resulted in significant challenges for the jihadist leader later in his career.

Bait Ullah's successor, Hakeem Ullah Mehsud, appointed Khurasani as TTP's emir of Khyber agency in 2012, which was the strongest jihadist stronghold after Waziristan. Ansar-ul-Islam (AI), a strong pro-state militant group, existed in the strategically important Tirah valley of Khyber agency, presenting the TTP and its anti-state allies with several challenges ([Dawn](#), January 28, 2013). The first thing Khurasani did after becoming Khyber emir was eliminate the AI from the Tirah valley, with support from TTP groups from neighboring Orakzai, Dir, Bajaur,

and Waziristan areas ([The News International](#), March 19, 2013).

Khurasani went on from this success to become a formidable TTP commander after two of his close aides were given critical roles in TTP's central leadership. His former spokesman, Ehsanullah Ehsan, was appointed as TTP's Central spokesman and his deputy, Qari Shakeel Ahmad, became leader of the both the TTP executive council and political commission. [14] This made Khurasani a significant leadership figure in TTP, placing him as a serious candidate to succeed Hakeem Ullah in late 2013. That Khurasani was not chosen to lead the organization would partially result in his splintering from TTP.

Parting Ways With TTP

Khurasani always held major ambitions for TTP. He aimed to develop its organizational structure like that of the Afghan Taliban, transitioning the group from a fluid alliance to a strong, centralized insurgent force. The TTP was based around a tribal structure, where each tribal unit was nearly independent and central leadership held minimal control of its regional wings. Khurasani had convinced some TTP senior commanders, including Hakeem Ullah, of the need for these reforms, but it never materialized. At that time, the strongest TTP subgroup, TTP Mehsud, led by Mufti Wali ur Rehman, was against any such reforms, and would not allow any external interference in his group, including from the TTP emir. [15]

Khurasani's frustration with the TTP leadership structure further increased when Fazlullah appointed him to oversee Mehsud tribal relations, for the purpose of controlling fighting between two major TTP Mehsud factions, the Khalid Sajna group and Shehryar Mehsud, who were loyalists of Wali ur Rehman and Hakeem Ullah, respectively. The Sajna group opposed

Khurasani's appointment, declaring that Fazlullah was ignorant to think that he could control the powerful Mehsud Taliban faction through an outsider commander. [16]

The second incident that further deepened Khurasani's division with the TTP leadership was his opposition to negotiations with the Pakistani government. Islamabad had offered to open peace negotiations with TTP shortly before the assassination of Hakeem Ullah. The majority of the group's commanders favored negotiating ([Dawn](#), May 23, 2013). Khurasani doubted that the government would follow through with the TTP's demands, including implementing Sharia law and ending Pakistan's alliance with the United States. According to him, the negotiations were a trap, meant to harm the TTP's unity ([Umar Media](#), 2014). Khurasani covertly carried out major, brutal terrorist attacks in the country to damage the peace negotiations. The attacks were later claimed by two unknown groups, Ahrar-ul-Hind and Abna-ul-Hafsa ([Dawn](#), July 26, 2014; [Dawn](#), September 7, 2014).

Becoming the TTP leader was the only way for Khurasani to run the group according to his own ambitions. This made him a serious candidate for TTP leadership when Hakeem Ullah was assassinated in a U.S. drone strike in November 2013 ([Geo News](#), May 12, 2017). The subsequent appointment of Fazlullah as the leader of TTP and his subsequent policy choices further weakened the TTP organizational structure, finally resulting in Khurasani splintering from the group. He was succeeded by several other important commanders, while he himself established a separate faction in August 2014, known as Jumat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) ([Ihay-e-Khelafat](#), August 2014).

Khurasani's Inclinations Toward Islamic State Khorasan

Khurasani was thought of as a likely candidate to join Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) branch because he shares similarly radical beliefs and is closely associated with IS-K's founding figures—who were formerly influential TTP commanders—including Shaikh Maqbool Orakzai and Hafiz Saeed Khan. Secondly, Khurasani always tied his operational goals with the eventual establishment of a Caliphate, which Islamic State (IS) declared globally. That declaration was the reason that he authored several articles in JuA's magazine, titled *Ihya-e-Caliphate* [revival of the Caliphate], which welcomed the arrival of the IS caliphate. [17] Khurasani stated in his essays that the IS declaration of a Caliphate was a major victory for jihadists across the globe.

On the other hand, Khurasani was still despised by some of the Afghanistan-Pakistan area Salafists for his role in eliminating the pro-state Salafist-jihadist group in his native Mohmand agency shortly after establishing TTP in 2008 ([The News](#), July 18, 2008). Khurasani always claimed that his conflict with Shah Khalid was a result of his close collaboration with the Pakistani security establishment, which created issues for Khurasani and TTP. Khurasani has stated that his conflict with Khalid was not rooted in his Salafist-Hanafist sectarian beliefs. [18] Despite his clarifications, the Shah Khalid group accused him of being anti-Salafist due to his actions against their group. That same group of Salafists quickly came to dominate IS-K and shaped it into a pure Salafist group. These IS-K figures included the former Shah Khalid loyalist, Shaikh Jalaluddin, who served as a top religious figure in the group ([Jihadology](#), September 2015). This was one of the main reasons that Khurasani's path into IS-K was blocked, despite his ideological commitment and past operational successes.

Conclusion

As Khurasani rejoins TTP, his major issues with the organization's central leadership now seem resolved, particularly that of structural reforms. The September 2018 TTP guidelines issued by the group's current leader, Mufi Noor Wali Mehsud, addressed this issue ([Umar Media](#), 2018). This could be the reason that Khurasani, in a recent interview with TTP Umar Radio recorded after he rejoined the organization, gave listeners his unconditional apologies for all of his past mistakes and suggested that all other TTP commanders do the same ([Umar Media](#), August 21, 2020). He emphasized that this is the time for all of the militant groups under the TTP umbrella to forget the past and unite for their future survival.

A TTP source based in Kunar, Afghanistan and close to Khurasani told the author that last year the Afghan Taliban issued a special code of conduct for interactions with anti-state Pakistani militants, including TTP [19]. This alarmed TTP splinter groups, instigating a return to unity for fear of their survival, as a decision by the Afghan Taliban to target the insurgents who are fighting their Pakistani sponsors could prove disastrous for those groups. The TTP source said that this fear resulted in Khurasani's unconditional merger back into TTP. Khurasani admits in his interview with Umar Radio that secret negotiations to bring JuA back into the TTP umbrella had been going on for the past couple of years ([Umar Media](#), August 21, 2020).

The expected change in the political and security landscape of Afghanistan as a result of the withdrawal of U.S. troops leaves TTP as the second largest militant group in the country behind the Afghan Taliban, thus posing a serious security threat to Pakistan. This makes influential anti-state commanders in TTP, like Khurasani, particularly dangerous actors.

Abdul Sayed has a master's degree in political science from Lund University, Sweden, and is now an independent researcher focused on jihadism and the Af-Pak region. He's on Twitter at: @abdsayed

Notes

[1] Umar Khalid Khurasani, "The Future of the Pakistani Army and Kashmir," *Ihya-e-Khelafat*, Issue 1, April 2017, pp. 7-8.

[2] Those TTP commanders who were killed by drone strikes while listed on the U.S. Reward for Justice program include Bait Ullah Mehsud, Qari Hussain Mehsud, Hakeem Ullah Mehsud, Wali ur Rehman Mehsud, Khalid Said Sajna, Mullah Fazlullah and others.

[3] *Ihya-e-Khelafat* interview with Umar Khalid Khurasani," *Ihya-e-Khelafat*, September 2013, pp. 6-11.

[4] HuM was a major Pakistani Deobandi jihadist group, established in the 1980s to support the jihadists war against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, later extending its operations into Indian Kashmir in the early 1990s. HuM also fought shoulder-to-shoulder with al-Qaeda and other foreign jihadists to help the Taliban keep its hold on Afghanistan since its emergence there in the mid-1990s. For details check, Muhammad Amir Rana, 2003. "Gateway to Terrorism," (New Millennium publications: London).

[5] For details check, Don Rassler, "Al-Qaida and the Pakistani Harakat Movement: Reflections and Questions about the pre-2001 Period," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 11, Issue 6.

[6] Khurasani, 2017.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Ibid.

[9] Muhammad Amir Rana, 2015. “The Militant: Development of a Jihadi Character in Pakistan,” (The Narratives Publications: Islamabad).

[10] Khurasani, 2017.

[11] Other prominent jihadists who rose in the ranks of TTP and al-Qaeda in Pakistan and declares the same grievance as a central factor in turning against the state include, for example, Commander Badr Mansur, Engr Ihsan Aziz, Commander Khattab Mansur, and Mufti Asim Umar.

[12] Maulana Qasim Khurasani, “From the independence movement to the movement of Taliban in Pakistan,” *Ihaye Khelafat*, April 2017, pp. 13-14

[13] Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, *Inqilab-i-Mehsud [Mehsuds Revolution]* (Paktika, Afghanistan: Al-Shahab Publishers, 2017).

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Umar Khalid Khurasani, “Seekers of the Islamic Caliphate,” *Ihaye Khelafat*, November 2014, pp. 12-14.

[18] “Ihya-e-Khelafat interview with Umar Khalid Khurasani,” *Ihya-e-Khelafat*, September 2013, pp. 6-11.

[19] This code of conduct from Afghan Taliban to TTP surfaced on social media in September 2020 ([Twitter.com/Natsecjeff](https://twitter.com/Natsecjeff), September 13, 2020). A source close to TTP leadership in Kunar told the author that the Afghan Taliban

handed these instructions to TTP quite earlier than the day they emerged online. The new rules stated that the TTP would have to register its members with the Afghan Taliban, and promise not to stage operations on foreign countries, such as Pakistan, from Afghanistan.

The TTP strongly protested the new rules to the Afghan Taliban, declaring that it undermines the critical role that TTP has played in the Afghan Taliban’s two-decade-long resistance against the United States and its allies in the region. Although the Afghan Taliban has not publicly commented on the new code of conduct rules, it alarmed various TTP splinter groups, pushing them to unite to survive in the future.

Militant Leadership Monitor is a publication of The Jamestown Foundation. It is designed to be read by policymakers and other specialists, yet also be accessible to the general public. In order to purchase a subscription, please visit <https://jamestown.org/product-category/militant-leadership-monitor/mlm-subscription/>. Unauthorized reproduction or redistribution of this or any Jamestown publication is strictly prohibited by law.