



# MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

## Personalities Behind the Insurgency

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#### **The Warlords Return to Afghanistan: Atta Mohammad Noor**

*John Foulkes*

On June 21, the Afghan warlord Atta Mohammad Noor pledged to mobilize the public of his native Balkh province to fight the Taliban ([TOLO News](#), June 22; [Twitter.com/Atamohammadnoor](#), June 21). The announcement came as the Taliban has made dramatic territorial gains in the country, having seized more than 50 Afghan districts since May, and U.S. and coalition forces rapidly withdraw from the country ([TOLO News](#), June 22). Noor, in his June 21 remarks, called for a “national mobilization” to turn the tide against the Taliban advance, potentially signaling a new phase of the conflict, as local and ethnically-based militias organize and veteran warlords call upon long existing networks of potential fighters. But who is Atta Mohammad Noor, and how will his return to the battlefield affect the security situation in Afghanistan?

Noor is an ethnic Tajik born in 1965 and raised in Mazar-i-Sharif, Balkh province ([Afghan Bios](#), March 19). He became affiliated with the Tajik-dominated Jamiat-e Islami party in the early 1980s and rose to prominence as a mujahideen commander during the Soviet-Afghan War. By the time of the Afghan communist party’s collapse in 1992, Noor had become one of the most influential commanders in northern Afghanistan. During the Soviet war, Noor fought against troops commanded by Abdul Rashid Dostum, who was then a regional commander under the communist government, overseeing mostly ethnic Uzbek soldiers. Dostum defected from the government in 1992, and formed the Junbish-e-Milli party, of which Noor was temporarily a member. However, Noor split from Dostum in 1993 due to ideological differences, and the two continue to be rivals to this day. After the fall of the Taliban, Noor was able to beat Dostum to Mazar-i-Sharif, seizing control of the city and the entirety of Balkh province following a series of battles with the Uzbek warlord. He eventually became governor of Balkh province, a role he held from 2004 to 2018 ([Afghan Bios](#), March 19).

As governor, Noor seized complete control of Balkh province by placing family members and close lieutenants from Jamiat-e Islami, who had fought with him over the past decades, to subordinate positions ([Gandhara](#), March 21, 2018). Noor also placed his militia fighters and other loyalists into the Afghan Local Police (ALP), quickly forming the bulk of those law enforcement units. Reportedly, by 2013, 80 percent of the ALP in Balkh province had some ties to Noor, in effect giving him control over the governing and law enforcement of the province. From his perch as the “king” of Balkh province he reportedly made a substantial fortune through control of local businesses, real estate, and criminal drug trafficking networks. [1] The province also became one of the most stable and prosperous in Afghanistan.

Noor’s time as governor came to an end amid a controversial confrontation with the administration of President Ashraf Ghani in 2017. The longstanding policy of the Hamid Karzai administration, in office from 2004 to 2014, was to place local warlords in power in their respective territories, and therefore absorb their militias into the government’s battles with the Taliban. President Ghani, however, sought to rein in the local powerbrokers in a bid to exert his own authority and rule of law in the country ([Commentaries](#), October 2, 2018). Noor initially refused to step down from his governorship, but did so only after the Ghani government offered significant concessions, including giving him the ability to choose his own successor. This successor would be Muhammad Ishaq Rahgozar, who entered office in March 2018. He was replaced by Mohammad Farhad Azimi, also considered close to Noor, in October 2020 ([Khamaa](#), October 6, 2020). It was widely

understood then and remains known today that Noor is the real power in Balkh province.

Noor’s most recent pledge to mobilize Balkh province to fight the Taliban is not a unique development. He personally led his forces against the Taliban in the province in April 2018 ([Twitter.com/BalkhTariq](#), April 29, 2018). After his most recent public pledge, he again went to his home province to lead operations against the Taliban ([Twitter.com/Atamohammadnoor](#), June 29). What is new, however, is the call for a wider national mobilization, wherein Noor appealed, “to the various political factions to ask their forces to join the National Mobilization so that we can unitedly and strongly stand against our country’s enemies” ([Twitter.com/Atamohammadnoor](#), June 29). Though local militias have been a mainstay in the fight against the Taliban for the entirety of the war, Noor now appears to be calling for a wider mobilization, and for these militias to be integrated with the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).

This integration appears to have been given approval by the Ghani administration. President Ghani called on the militias to form a “united front” to support the security forces. The Afghan Defense Minister stated that “patriots and people everywhere [should] stand alongside their security and defense forces” ([al-Jazeera](#), June 25). On June 29, an ANDSF spokesperson announced that national mobilization forces would be integrated with small local army units and operate alongside the ANDSF. Reports also indicate that the Afghan military will arm and pay the militia members associated with the national mobilization ([Reporterly](#), June 29).

Though the move to integrate the militias is likely to meet the approval of Noor and other warlords, the policy decisions could have unintended consequences. Namely, the desperate move will grant greater influence to the leaders of the local militias, reversing the Ghani administration's long-term efforts to roll back their power. Should the security situation continue to deteriorate in Afghanistan—and all indications point that way, as a recent U.S. intelligence assessment estimates that the government in Kabul could collapse six months after the American withdrawal—Noor and other warlords will likely seize greater control of their local areas, create security forces loyal exclusively to themselves, and potentially form conditions for even greater levels of violence in the future ([al-Jazeera](#), June 24).

Not currently clear is whether the activation of local militias will be able to turn the tide against the Taliban's advance, as the various armed groups led by the warlords have not yet made any substantial territorial gains in the country. As Afghanistan enters a new, chaotic phase in its long-running conflict, Atta Muhammad Noor is a figure to watch, as he continues to battle the Taliban and secures his influence in the north to the detriment of Kabul.

## Notes

[1] See HRW report, March 3, 2015: [https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/03/03/today-we-shall-all-die/afghanistans-strongmen-and-legacy-impunity#\\_ftn152](https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/03/03/today-we-shall-all-die/afghanistans-strongmen-and-legacy-impunity#_ftn152)

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## Arrested and Released: A Profile of Iranian-Backed Militia Commander Qassim Musleh

*Rami Jameel*

On May 26, Iraqi security forces arrested Qassim Musleh, a prominent Shia militia leader. He is the commander of the strategically important western Iraq sector within the Iranian-backed militia umbrella organization, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Authorities were not quick to provide media sources with a reason for the arrest, but spokespeople for the security forces cited Article 4 of the Iraqi counter-terrorism law ([Baghdad Today](#), May 26).

Citing Article 4 led to speculation that Musleh was arrested for a potential role in attacking U.S. forces at the Ain al-Assad military base in al-Anbar province in western Iraq, the biggest Iraqi base that hosts U.S. troops. However, other accounts suggested that Musleh was arrested over accusations of corruption and involvement in the assassination of anti-militia activists in his hometown of Karbala in southern Iraq ([Al Jazeera](#), May 26).

Musleh's arrest sparked an angry protest by PMF leaders and personnel. Some of them gathered in a show of force near the headquarters of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, demanding Musleh's immediate release ([Arabic Post](#), May 26). Musleh's arrest was conducted by a security unit that reports directly to al-Kadhimi. No lower authority within the government would have been able to make such a move against the powerful PMF. Musleh remained in custody for

weeks and was only released on June 9. The judiciary stated that there was not enough evidence against him ([Sky News Arabia](#), June 9). The whole saga was just the most recent and exciting episode in the Iraqi government's long struggle to rein in the Iranian-backed Shia militias.

### **Living and Fighting in Karbala**

Immediately after his release, Musleh was received with jubilation in Karbala, located 60 miles south of Baghdad and one of the holiest cities for Shia Muslims. In his first public statement after being released, he denied any wrongdoing and condemned the accusation that he or other PMF figures had committed terrorism. He claimed that foreign pressure (implicitly from the United States) on the Iraqi government was behind his arrest ([Facebook.com/almada.foundation](#), June 9).

Musleh was celebrated in the Shia holy shrine of al-Imam al-Hussein in Karbala, with chants from his friends and followers ([YouTube](#), June 10). But behind the jubilation, signs of the ongoing intra-Shia power struggle were apparent.

Qassim Mahmoud Kareem Musleh al-Khafaji was born and raised in Karbala. After the Gulf War in 1991, the government of then-Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein arrested Musleh for his alleged involvement in the Shia uprising that followed the war. After the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Musleh was reportedly arrested by American forces for militant activities, but was released later ([al-Ain](#), May 30).

Musleh then emerged as a leader of a local force of vigilantes. As the power of the Mahdi Army

—a Shia militia led by the anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr—grew in Karbala, and elsewhere in the Shia areas of Iraq, Musleh's group appeared to be one of the few forces that could counterbalance Sadr in the city. Musleh became close to Sheikh Abdul-Mahdi al-Karbala'e, a representative of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most influential Shia cleric in Iraq. Musleh's group provided protection for al-Karbala'e, who eventually became the custodian of the Imam al-Hussein Shrine in the city. [1]

It is well known that Sistani rarely leaves his home in Najaf, another holy Shia city 110 miles south of Baghdad, and that due to his religious preferences, he does not lead the Friday prayer rituals there. Therefore, he has increasingly used his representatives in Karbala to convey the messages of the Shia religious leadership. Musleh's role as head of the protection force of the Imam al-Hussein shrine in Karbala became even more important. After the former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's crackdown on al-Sadr followers and their militias across Baghdad and southern Iraq in 2008, Musleh's protection force gained greater legitimacy and influence in Karbala.

### **PMF Differences**

When the Sunni extremist group, the Islamic State (IS), took over Mosul and most of the Sunni areas in western Iraq in 2014, the Shia community felt critically threatened. IS did not hesitate to announce that its next destination was going to be Karbala and Najaf. Sistani issued a religious ruling (*fatwa*) urging Shia men and all Iraqis to join the security forces to fight IS. Musleh's force became the Ali al-Akbar Brigade under the PMF umbrella. He fought in various areas of the country over the course of the war

against IS. By the time the campaign ended, Musleh's clout in Karbala had grown considerably. That led to friction with al-Karbala's associates and possibly al-Karbala's himself. Sistani's representatives tended to separate their own faction within PMF from the larger faction that had direct links to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Musleh eventually was given the support to form a new brigade called al-Tofof Brigade and became part of the latter faction ([Aswaar1](#), June 5).

The release of Musleh came on the same day the Iranian General Esmail Qaani visited Baghdad. Qaani is the commander of the IRGC-Quds Force. His visit came only after Iraqi and PMF leaders attempted to exert pressure on the prime minister, which failed to secure Musleh's swift release ([Annaharar](#), June 9).

However, reports suggested that he was transferred to PMF custody when his detention conditions were relaxed. Musleh's role in the PMF does not seem to have been affected by his arrest. By arresting Musleh, Prime Minister al-Kadhimi made clear that he was pursuing a policy of increasing governmental control of the PMF and creating greater accountability for the militia leaders. Musleh is an anti-American figure, but like other PMF leaders, he did not accept responsibility for attacks on U.S. troops in recent years, though he did not denounce those strikes either. His arrest could have been a message to other militia leaders that attacks on Iraqi bases hosting U.S. troops would have consequences. Musleh had also become more vulnerable to the Shia-led government's actions as he fell from grace following his decision to leave the Sistani faction for the other militias that had more direct links to Iran. However, his

release without charges shows the limits of Iraqi government's actions against the PMF.

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## Notes

[1] Author's interviews with two Karbala-based journalists, who preferred to remain anonymous, on May 30.

## Polisario Leader Continues 48-Year Struggle for Western Saharan Independence: Brahim Ghali

*Jemimah Hudson*

Brahim Ghali, the 73-year-old leader of the Polisario Front in Western Sahara, was flown to Spain in April in order to receive medical treatment. Amid speculation that Ghali could be suffering from cancer, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) confirmed in a statement on April 23 that the president was “under treatment for coronavirus (COVID-19) and medical surveillance” ([Channel Africa](#), April 23).

Ghali later appeared before a Spanish court via video link to answer allegations of torture and genocide, as well as abuses in Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, in a case filed by a naturalized Spanish Polisario dissident. Judge Santiago Pedraz turned down a request by prosecutors to detain Ghali, stating that the plaintiffs had failed to provide evidence the Polisario leader had committed any crime, leaving him free to depart Spain once his treatment had finished. The Polisario Front’s spokesman in Spain confirmed on June 2 that Ghali had arrived in Algiers to continue his recovery from COVID-19 ([Al-Jazeera](#), June 2). Algeria is Polisario’s main backer, hosting the group in its territory and providing its leaders with passports to travel on. The extent of Algeria’s support for Polisario was highlighted when Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune visited Ghali in the hospital on the day of his return.

Spain’s decision to admit Ghali triggered a diplomatic row between Spain and Morocco.

Rabat views Polisario as a separatist rebel group, while the UN recognizes it as representative of the Sahrawi people. The issue is particularly sensitive given recent clashes in the Western Sahara between the Polisario Front and Moroccan military forces. The Moroccan Foreign Affairs Ministry declared in a statement that the case “exposed the hostile attitudes and harmful strategies of Spain towards the question of the Moroccan Sahara [and] revealed the collusion of our northern neighbor with the Kingdom’s adversaries to undermine the territorial integrity of Morocco” ([Moroccan Ministry of Affairs](#), May 31). Rabat will have been further antagonized by the fact Ghali was flown to Spain on Algerian papers and in an Algerian jet, given those two countries’ historic rivalry.

In response, Morocco purposefully loosened security controls along its borders with the Spanish-controlled enclave of Ceuta. This resulted in a huge surge in migrant crossings over a 36-hour period beginning on May 19. Around 10,000 people reached Spanish territory, circumventing border fences by swimming or crossing at low tide ([Africa News](#), May 25). Rabat continues to deny that the incursion was in any way connected with Ghali’s case and has since readmitted around 8,500 people.

### Who is Brahim Ghali?

Ghali was born in Smara—a city in the Moroccan-controlled section of Western Sahara—in 1946 with a Spanish passport. He is the current president-in-exile of SADR and leader of the Polisario Front. He was one of Polisario’s founding members in 1973 and led the first raids against occupying Spanish forces that sparked the armed struggle for Western Saharan independence. He was subsequently elected as

the new Polisario General Secretary and selected to command the front's military wing, the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army (SPLA). In 1976, following the Spanish exit from Western Sahara, the Polisario Front proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), commencing a war for independence from Morocco that would last until 1991. Ghali was designated as the defense minister of the first government of the SADR, remaining in the post until 1989, when he was chosen as commander-in-chief of the Second Military Region. Two years later, SADR signed a ceasefire with Morocco under the aegis of the UN. Following this, Ghali began a career as a diplomat, holding various posts, from Polisario's representative in Spain to its ambassador in Algeria.

Ghali was elected leader of the Polisario Front and president of SADR in July 2016 following the death of long-time president Mohamed Abdelaziz Ezzedine. About 2,400 voters attended the one-candidate congress, which was held in a Sahrawi refugee camp in Algeria. The reasoning given for Ghali running unopposed was a desire to field a "consensus candidate." According to the governor of the refugee camp, "the Sahrawis want to send the message of unity and cohesion to close ranks behind the banner of the Polisario Front as the sole liberation movement to achieve our independence" ([al-Monitor](#), July 12, 2016).

In his first speech as president, Ghali reiterated calls for a peaceful settlement to Western Sahara's quest for independence, but also made it known that Sahrawis were ready to fight for their freedom. This attitude was demonstrated just four months later, when a standoff brought Moroccan and Polisario forces within 600 feet of each other in a narrow strip of land near the Mauritanian border ([al-Monitor](#), March 10, 2017). Polisario subsequently mobilized troops

near the Moroccan-built berm, a wall of earth and rocks protected by landmines dividing areas controlled by Morocco from those controlled by Polisario.

Ghali announced in November 2020 a "resumption of armed struggle in defense of the legitimate rights of our people" in response to an operation launched by Morocco to reopen the road to neighboring Mauritania, after Sahrawi separatists set up roadblocks and stopped passage across the Western Saharan-Mauritanian border. Ghali accused Morocco of breaching the terms of the ceasefire by attacking civilians protesting peacefully. Soon after, the SPLA said it had attacked Moroccan positions, ending the ceasefire which had held since 1991. Rabat, meanwhile, denied there had been any armed clashes between the sides and said the three-decade truce remained in place ([al-Jazeera](#), November 13, 2020).

### **What Lies Ahead for Ghali?**

If and when Ghani fully recovers from COVID-19, he will continue to push for a planned referendum on self-determination for the Sahrawi people, which has been repeatedly postponed due to a dispute between Rabat and the Polisario over the composition of the electorate and the status of the territory. His willingness to resume "armed struggle"—as indicated following tensions in the remote buffer region near the Guerguerat border—will serve to inflame tensions with Rabat, with further clashes likely. Meanwhile, Ghali will remain reliant on links with Algeria for both diplomatic and economic support. Algiers is also supporting efforts to combat COVID-19 in Western Sahara; in May last year—the anniversary of Polisario's creation in 1973—Ghali visited a new field hospital that had been installed by the Algerian

People's National Armed Forces on Tebboune's orders. Algiers also sent flights carrying food aid and pharmaceuticals from its main military air base at Boufarik ([Sahara Press Service](#), May 10, 2020).

### **Rabat's Position**

The diplomatic row between Morocco and Spain highlights ongoing attempts by Rabat to push back against Spanish and EU policy toward Western Sahara. Spain's policy towards the Polisario and the Sahrawi people is unlikely to change, with Madrid maintaining that its position on the Western Sahara is in line with UN resolutions. It will, however, seek to uphold constructive bilateral relations with Morocco, particularly as it will want to prevent large refugee inflows. For its part, Morocco will also want to maintain cordial relations with Spain, given its desire to maintain trade links and economic ties with the EU.

Legal challenges presented by the Polisario Front to the European Court of Justice over the Morocco-EU trade agreement have the potential to heighten tensions once again. An ECJ ruling in favor of the Polisario Front would prevent Morocco from exporting goods produced in the Western Sahara to Europe. This would likely prompt strong retaliation by Morocco, who have shown a willingness to use force against the Polisario Front. In April, Polisario's police chief Addah al-Bendir was killed in a drone strike carried out by the Moroccan military ([al-Monitor](#), April 6). Rabat will continue to resist any moves by Ghali's for a referendum on Sahrawi self-determination.

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## **The Long Arm of Turkish Drones: A Post-Mortem Analysis of the Life and Times of Syrian born PKK Leader Sofi Nureddin**

*Can Kasapoglu*

Contemporary Turkish counterterrorism campaigns rest on sophisticated, close cooperation between the Turkish military and national intelligence with a pronounced use of drones. This was reflected in a recent operation, which targeted one of the top Syrian-Kurdish figures of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), Hafez al-Muhammad, a.k.a. Sofi Nureddin.

On May 8, Sofi Nureddin was killed in northern Iraq by Turkish F-16s based on real-time intelligence gathered by unmanned aerial systems ([TRT Haber](#), May 18). Along with Fehman Hüseyin, a.k.a. Dr. Bahoz Erdal, Nureddin is one of the top two Syrian-Kurdish leaders within the PKK. Sofi Nureddin joined the group in the 1990s, and climbed up to the highest echelons over time. In the past, he even commanded the organization's armed-wing ([Turkish Interior Ministry](#), May 2017). According to the Turkish press, in 2018, Sofi Nureddin commanded the PKK's defensive line that collapsed in an attempt to halt Turkey's Operation Olive Branch ([Sabah](#), May 18). Nureddin was also responsible for the execution of 13 captured Turkish nationals in Gara on February 13 ([Daily Sabah](#), May 17).

Little information on Nureddin's personal background is available. However, he joined the PKK in 1990 and quickly became the group's local commander in the eastern Turkish province

of Van. Between 1991 and 1994, he conducted multiple infiltration operations into Turkey, actively taking part in terrorist activity in the mountainous Sirnak area. He orchestrated multiple attacks in urban areas, killing hundreds. He was later promoted to the role of operational leader in Hakkari province, in Turkey's southeast. Between 2003-2007, Nureddin worked as the PKK's general coordinator in the southeastern Turkish province of Diyarbakir. According to Turkish press sources, Nureddin was also the primary contact person within the PKK in running critical meetings with foreign intelligence services from the United States, France and Russia ([Sabah](#), May 19). In 2009, he became the leader of the organization's central armed command ([Twitter.com/OmerOzkizilcik](#), May 17).

Nureddin was the terrorist network's key figure in Syria, having nominally led PKK forces there from 2013-2015 ([Turkish Interior Ministry](#), May 2017). As he was the highest-ranking PKK figure killed by Turkish military and intelligence in recent history, Nureddin's loss is likely to significantly damage the group's ability to maintain its operations in the Levant. Some sources have claimed that Nureddin could have made it to the top position within the terrorist organization ([Sabah](#), May 18).

Along with Dr. Bahoz Erdal—allegedly a schoolmate of Bashar al-Assad when he was studying medicine in Damascus—Sofi Nureddin represented the Syrian-Kurdish faction within the PKK. Before his death, his influence was growing due to the PKK's geopolitical center of gravity shifting from northern Iraq to northern Syria.

Some experts noted that before Nureddin was killed, he was close to brokering a deal between

the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian-Kurdish off-shoots of the PKK led by Mazloum Abdi that make up the primary component of the Western-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the core 'Qandil leadership' (so named for being based in the Qandil mountains region of northern Iraq) of the PKK ([Twitter.com/OmerOzkizilcik](https://twitter.com/OmerOzkizilcik), May 17).

Turkey's pinpoint targeting of Sofi Nureddin closely follows the 'dronization' of Turkish counterterrorism operations, especially when targeting high-value targets with pinpoint accuracy. While his cave was hit by the Turkish Air Force's F-16 aircraft, surveillance and target acquisition was the work of networked unmanned aerial systems ([Sabah](https://www.sabah.com.tr), May 18).

### **Turkish Drone Strikes Against High-Value PKK Militants**

A number of cases remain telling in grasping Turkey's new targeted and dronized counterterrorism endeavor. Back in October 2020, for example, Mesut Taşkın (a.k.a. Demhat Sperti), a key militant leader, responsible for an arson campaign in the southern Turkish province of Hatay, was killed by a joint operation of the Turkish intelligence and the military. In only 2020, Taşkın managed to set hundreds of hectares of forests on fire ([Anadolu Agency](https://www.anadoluyag.com.tr), February 23). Aydın Şimşek (a.k.a. Agit Bismil), a key militant overseeing the PKK's terrorist activities in Diyarbakir, was also killed in a Turkish drone operation ([TRT Haber](https://www.trthaber.com.tr), June 3).

Müzeyyen Aydınli (Dr. Amara) remains an interesting case within the PKK leadership. An important figure within the PKK's female ranks—known as the YJA-Star—Dr. Amara was infamous for recruiting and training female militias to execute suicide-bombings, including sensational

terrorist attacks in Ankara and Istanbul. Her recruits were responsible for the deaths of at least 174 civilians and 37 Turkish troops. In 2020, the Turkish military's armed drones killed Dr. Amara in the southeastern town of Lice, Diyarbakir ([Milliyet](https://www.milliyet.com.tr), October 6, 2020).

Ayfer Kordu (Bese Erzincan) was another significant female figure who made it to the top branch of the PKK's ruling elite. Bese Erzincan, a close associate of Abdullah Ocalan—the imprisoned founder of the PKK—was responsible for generating a female militia. She joined the organization back in the 1980s, and received her ideological indoctrination directly from Ocalan himself in Lebanon and Syria. In October 2019, she was killed in a Turkish drone strike in the Qandil mountain region of northern Iraq ([TRT Haber](https://www.trthaber.com.tr), October 7, 2019).

### **High-Tech Hunt**

Ankara's recent success in hunting high-value militant leaders, such as Sofi Nureddin and others, is due to several factors: Turkey's strategic culture has undergone a transformation in recent years; the country's burgeoning base of defense technology and industry; the country's intelligence agencies have carefully analyzed the PKK's 'human resources.'

In defense technology, the combination of Roketsan-manufactured highly accurate smart munitions and unmanned aerial systems with long loitering times over target areas—most notably the Bayraktar TB-2 and ANKA—equip Turkey's counterterrorism strikes with an invaluable flexibility in operations that require pinpoint accuracy.

Unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) have become a strategic asset extending throughout the

branches and institutions of Turkish foreign policy. Clearly, no Turkish service exercises ‘exclusive or privileged’ rights over drone usage. Turkish intelligence, all branches of the military, the gendarmerie and police forces—the latter two falling under the Ministry of Interior—all enjoy their own drone warfare arsenals. They are able to easily coordinate in counter-terrorism operations.

Turkish defense planners have grasped well the ‘human terrain’ of the PKK network. High-value militants are not easily replaceable. For this reason, Ankara is targeting those with critical knowledge of either a paramilitary function, like recruiting suicide bombers, or key conduits, such as Sofi Nureddin, who sustain links between the PKK and Syrian Kurds.

## Conclusion

Turkey is likely to increase its ability to target high-value militant leaders in the coming years as Ankara gains and fields new technologies. The Turkish defense industries’ autonomous loitering munitions with advanced AI-based target acquisition algorithms could be one such technology. Kargu-2—a small, smart platform recently highlighted in a UN report concerning Turkey’s Libya expedition—could be a key special forces weapon of choice in this respect ([undocs.org](https://undocs.org), March 8; [STM](#)). Eventually, Turkish military and intelligence could be able to boost the autonomous features in their drone operations against high-value militants.

Larger Turkish platforms will be able to carry unprecedented payloads in the near future. Aksungur, from the makers of ANKA, for example, has already test-fired its joint-direct attack munitions (JDAM) system, while Akıncı completed its live-fire tests with MAM-T of

Roketsan ([Daily Sabah](#), April 22). Such heavy munitions will inevitably deliver far stronger firepower to the harsh, mountainous terrain in which PKK militants have traditionally found shelter.

The successful operation that killed Nureddin, along with many of his compatriots in the PKK leadership, was a devastating development to the terrorist group. As their leadership ranks are depleted, the PKK will, at least in the short-term, weaken and experience less of an ability to launch attacks against Turkey. And as Turkey aggressively invests in new military technologies, the country’s intelligence and military could find a greater ability maintain pressure on the PKK’s high-value militant leadership. The Sofi Nureddin incident has shown that Turkey is bringing new capabilities and technologies to its counterterrorism strategy.

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## Nigeria's Gombe State Paradox: The Rise and Fall of Three Boko Haram Militant Leaders

*Jacob Zenn*

Since 2015, only three terrorist attacks have been carried out in Nigeria's northwestern state of Gombe by the major insurgent groups in the country, which are Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), the al-Qaeda-linked Ansaru, and the Boko Haram faction led by the now deceased Abubakar Shekau. This is despite the fact that Gombe borders Borno, Yobe and Adamawa, which are the three states hardest hit by the insurgency in Nigeria. Gombe also borders Bauchi and Plateau states, which were also severely affected by insurgents, especially from 2011 to 2015. In fact, academic institutions have increasingly questioned how Gombe has evaded violence for so long compared to neighbors ([issafrica](#), June 2020).

Despite Gombe's relative peace, there are three key insurgent leaders in the state who have had interactions with ISWAP, the al-Qaeda-aligned Ansaru faction and the (formerly) Shekau-led faction. They are Baba Hassan Gombe, Muhammed Auwal Ibrahim Gombe (Auwal) and Ali Midan al-Gamborawi.

They represent the Gombe paradox: a state that has experienced so few attacks has been the home of several influential jihadists. At the same, what connects these three militants is the fact that, despite their separate factions, they all fell out of favor with the ruthless Shekau, and this fact defined their careers—and their deaths.

## Jihadist Presence and Limited Violence in Gombe

The minimal amount of violence in Gombe includes, in 2020, two attacks claimed by ISWAP near the nondescript village of Falgari ([Twitter.com/BokoWatch](#), July 25, 2020). No media reports of the attacks emerged, possibly due to their unspectacular nature. Although it is extremely rare for ISWAP to “fake-claim” any attack, let alone two in the same place, suspicions arose over whether these two attacks in Gombe actually occurred.

One piece of evidence that corroborates ISWAP's claims is the fact that the group abducted a pastor and two Christian women in Gombe in October 2020—the third terrorist incident in the state since 2015—when the three were traveling from their hometown in Jos, Plateau State, to Gombe State for a conference ([Vanguard](#), October 29, 2020). This proved that ISWAP at least had a presence in Gombe. ISWAP has not claimed all of its abductions of pastors and aid workers in northeastern Nigeria through Islamic State (IS)'s media apparatus. Therefore, it was not inconsistent with the group's past actions when the only thing it released to the press was a proof-of-life video of the pastor. In the video, the pastor said he was in custody of the “soldiers of the Caliphate.” This was in reference to ISWAP and not, for example, the rival faction led by the now-deceased Abubakar Shekau ([SaharaTV](#), October 29, 2020). The pastor and two women were more fortunate than other ISWAP detainees and were released 12 days after their abduction following an undisclosed ransom payment ([dailypost.ng](#), October 31, 2020).

These attacks and kidnappings demonstrate the paradox of Gombe. Even though the state has not reached the level of violence experienced in other bordering Nigerian states, it has still been possible for key jihadist leaders to emerge there, including Baba Hassan Gombe, Muhammed Auwal Ibrahim Gombe (Auwal) and Ali Midan al-Gamborawi.

### **Baba Hassan Gombe**

Baba Hassan Gombe was a media official of the Shekau faction of Boko Haram and deputy of Abu Zinnira ([Militant Leadership Monitor](#), May 4, 2018). Abu Zinnira himself was closely involved in negotiating and creating proof-of-life videos for the Shekau faction's April 2014 Chibok kidnapping. However, several weeks after Shekau was ejected from ISWAP in August 2016, a number of militants from his faction defected to ISWAP, including Abu Zinnira. Shekau and ISWAP had initially accommodated defections to either faction. However, the defection of Abu Zinnira, who had access to various videos that Shekau did not want to become public, was a step too far for the jihadist leader. As a result, Shekau shot Abu Zinnira in the head before his intended defection and then explained the execution to his *shura* council in an audio recording that was subsequently leaked ([Vanguard](#), February 24, 2017; [Unmasking Boko Haram](#), December 2016).

Baba Hassan Gombe also sought to defect from Shekau, likely having witnessed the fate of Abu Zinnira and being aware of Shekau's history of brutally killing other commanders. However, unlike Abu Zinnira, he did not telegraph this move to Shekau and succeeded in joining ISWAP.

After joining ISWAP, Baba Hassan Gombe was then responsible for releasing to journalists the group's proof-of-life video of three University of Maiduguri (UNIMAID) professors who were abducted on an oil prospecting study in Magumeri, Borno State in July 2017 ([Vanguard](#), July 26, 2017). Like the proof-of-life video of the pastor and two captives in Gombe that would be released three years later, the video of the UNIMAID professors was not released through IS media channels, but to Nigerian journalists, including Ahmed Salkida, who had also been Abu Zinnira's point-person for receiving videos. Baba Hassan Gombe, therefore, continued a precedent set by Abu Zinnira of providing local journalists, like Salkida, with "scoops" instead of always going through IS media. This was done for some proof-of-life videos, but not necessarily combat videos ([Twitter.com/A\\_Salkida](#), December 12, 2017).

However, Baba Hassan Gombe was killed in November 2017, and therefore his stint with ISWAP was short-lived. Salkida criticized the Nigerian army for only announcing Baba Hassan Gombe's death in November 2018 and connecting him inaccurately to ISWAP's abduction and "enslavement" of Christian schoolgirl Leah Sharibu. Salkida also noted that Baba Hassan Gombe's parents in Gombe had been informed of his death immediately after it occurred ([africanews.com](#), November 20, 2018). Another Shekau faction supporter on Facebook wrote that Baba Hassan Gombe was killed in Chibok and acknowledged that he had run the Shekau faction and then ISWAP's independent Facebook and Telegram accounts ([Facebook.com/ZalunciHaram](#), October 20, 2018). This would also explain why ISWAP's independent Telegram account ceased activities right after Baba Hassan Gombe's death.

## Muhammed Auwal Ibrahim Gombe

Like Baba Hassan Gombe, Muhammed Auwal Ibrahim Gombe (Auwal) fell out of Abubakar Shekau's favor. Auwal had been an orphan in childhood and received an Islamic and engineering university education in Gombe thanks to support by the family of prominent Nigerian Salafist scholar and now Nigerian Minister of Communications Isa Ali Pantami. [1] Pantami, whose father was a prominent scholar, became a subject of controversy in April 2021, when his sermons from the mid-2000s were reported in Nigerian media. In those sermons, he praised al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Osama bin Laden, Mullah Umar and Abdullah Azzam. He also said it was "pleasing" to Muslims when non-Muslims are killed ([premiumtimes.ng.com](http://premiumtimes.ng.com), April 22). While Pantami has now recanted those views, and the conflict between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria in the mid-2000s may provide some context to his former rhetoric, the impressionable Auwal may have opted for the jihadist path at least partly as a result of his mentor's preaching.

Isa Ali Pantami participated in a now-famous 2006 debate with Boko Haram founder Muhammed Yusuf, in which Pantami ridiculed Yusuf's theology, including his opposition to democracy and Western education. Notably, however, Pantami did not mention jihad, which meant Yusuf's belief that jihad was necessary to overthrow Nigeria's government and impose an Islamic state went without any counter-argument ([YouTube](http://YouTube), June 2006). After this debate, Auwal decided to follow Yusuf because he pursued the jihadist path, while Pantami ended up aligning with the Nigerian state. However, even before

Yusuf was killed by Nigerian security forces in 2009, Yusuf's followers chose Shekau over Auwal to be Yusuf's successor. That meant Shekau led the group from 2010 until its merger with IS in 2015. That merger created ISWAP, which expelled Shekau in 2016. [2]

Auwal, for his part, believed by 2011 that Shekau had deviated from Yusuf's teachings, including to not kill Muslim civilians even if they did not join the jihad and to not kill Christians as long as they were not proselytizing. Therefore, Auwal, who was a preacher, teamed with Khalid al-Barnawi, a longtime Nigerian al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) member, to form Ansaru, which explicitly condemned Shekau's excesses and vowed to not harm innocent Muslims while waging jihad against Christians when they fought with Muslims, such as in Nigeria's Middle Belt region ([al-Andalus](http://al-Andalus), April 2017). Ansaru's ideology was accordingly conveyed through statements published on jihadist web forums under Auwal's pseudonym, Abu Yusuf al-Ansari. Ansaru videos were released on YouTube but sometimes were also re-posted on jihadist web forums ([YouTube](http://YouTube), June 6, 2020). In addition, like AQIM, Ansaru targeted Westerners for kidnapping, utilizing al-Barnawi's skill and experience ([Terrorism Monitor](http://Terrorism Monitor), January 10, 2013).

Shekau did not take kindly to Auwal's decision to form Ansaru, and ordered his fighters to behead Ansaru members ([Twitter.com/A\\_Salkida](http://Twitter.com/A_Salkida), November 2, 2014). Auwal himself was able to escape Shekau's retribution until Ramadan in 2013, when Shekau's fighters found him preaching in Adamawa State using the pseudonym Muhammed Ibrahim, which comprised two of the four names in Auwal's given name. Shekau's fighters then shot and

killed Auwal, after which his wife and children returned to Gombe State, and Ansaru became temporarily defunct. The al-Qaeda-affiliated group nevertheless revived under new leadership in northwestern Nigeria several years later ([Terrorism Monitor](#), March 25, 2019). [3]

### **Ali Midan al-Gombawi**

Ali Midan al-Gombawi, like Baba Hassan Gombe and Auwal, was originally aligned with Shekau. He was featured in an infamous 2014 Boko Haram video showing him beheading a Nigerian Air Force pilot near Maiduguri ([YouTube](#), October 5, 2014). Those al-Gombawi and Shekau videos also were among the first Boko Haram videos in which IS *nasheeds* (Islamic vocal music) and IS-style flags appeared. Al-Gombawi's ruthlessness was also displayed in another gruesome video from this time, in which he ordered Boko Haram members in sport-utility vehicles to tie ropes around captured Nigerian policemen and drive in different directions until their limbs separated. Al-Gombawi then beheaded the policemen as other policemen waited in line for their turn. [4] In a sermon from a Pumbum, Borno mosque, where Shekau declared an "Islamic state" in Borno, al-Gombawi was so close to the leader that, at 2:30 minutes into the video, he seemingly appeared as one of Shekau's bodyguards. IS *nasheeds* played in the video and Shekau dressed in attire similar to that of Abubakar al-Baghdadi, the now deceased leader of IS. Shekau also appeared to copy al-Baghdadi's mannerisms, indicating al-Baghdadi's influence on him ([YouTube](#), November 10, 2014).

Later, as Shekau's "*amir* of the army (*jaysh*)," al-Gombawi worked with Abu Musab al-Barnawi, who later became the leader of ISWAP, to

organize Boko Haram's Twitter account, al-Urwha al-Wutqha, in coordination with IS. [5] Al-Gombawi's previous experience training abroad—reportedly with AQIM—likely facilitated al-Gombawi's contacts with IS. Many of IS' Twitter activists who helped Boko Haram, including Shayba al-Hamad, had originally been in AQIM before defecting to IS. [6] Eventually, by August 2015, IS announced Abu Musab al-Barnawi as ISWAP's new leader, meaning Shekau was expelled. Around this time, Shekau executed al-Gombawi. While details remain unclear, the execution likely related to al-Gombawi's IS contacts and Shekau's revulsion at being dethroned by Abu Musab al-Barnawi. [7] Even al-Gombawi's Shekau-like brutality was insufficient to spare his life.

Indeed, in Abu Musab al-Barnawi's audio discussing the circumstances surrounding Shekau's death, he mentioned Aliyu ([Telegram](#), June 6). According to his account, Aliyu, who trained with AQIM's predecessors in the Sahel, also became a key liaison to IS. However, Shekau killed Aliyu after learning that Aliyu, like numerous others, intended to defect to Abu Musab al-Barnawi's faction after the August 2016 split ([Twitter.com/VincentFoucher](#), June 21).

### **Conclusion**

Gombe State has produced at least three jihadists in ISWAP, Ansaru and Shekau's faction, who had different roles in media, leadership and army leadership. However, as was typical of Shekau's mercurial and brutal nature, they all fell out of his favor. Thus, they exemplify how Gombe State itself has been quiet, yet key jihadists—including Baba Hassan Gombe, Muhammed Auwal Ibrahim Gombe (Auwal) and

Ali Midan al-Gamborawi—have emerged from the state. Moreover, although Shekau was killed by ISWAP in May, Gombe remains a state to watch, as Nigeria continues to experience a prolonged insurgency and ISWAP demonstrates that it has the capabilities to expand deeper and more consistently into the state.

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## Notes

[1] Author's interview with Isa Ali Pantami, Abuja, Nigeria, November 2018

[2] Author's interview with Abu Aisha, Kano, Nigeria, 2017: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/03/30/abu-aisha-interview-2017/>

[3] Author's interview with Isa Ali Pantami, Abuja, Nigeria, November 2018

[4] For screenshots of the brutal video, see: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/04/13/boko-haram-videos-of-shekau-with-islamic-state-nasheed-al-gambarawi-beheading-of-airforce-pilot-and-sharia-punishments-october-5-2014/>

[5] For images of al-Urwa al-Wutqha tweets, see: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/04/06/twitter-first-comments-on-al-urwaha-al-wutqa-january-2015/>

[6] Author's discussion with Vincent Foucher, May 20, 2020.

[7] Ibid

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