



# MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

## Personalities Behind the Insurgency

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#### **A Harbinger of the Taliban's Future Policies: Mohammad Mohaqiq**

*John Foulkes*

As the Taliban completed its takeover of Kabul on August 15, a group of influential Afghan political leaders boarded a plane and escaped to Pakistan. The delegation included the speaker of the lower house of the Afghan parliament, Rehman Rehmani, as well as Ahmad Zia Massoud and Ahmad Wali Massoud, the brothers of the famed Northern Alliance commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, and others. Their ranks also included Haji Muhammad Mohaqiq, a famed Shia Hazara mujahideen leader who fought against the Soviet Union in the 1980s and against the Taliban in the 1990s ([al-Jazeera](#), August 16; [Twitter.com/AmbassadorSadiq](#), August 15). He was a stakeholder in the government of President Ashraf Ghani, and appears to be in a position to continue to exert influence in a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

Mohaqiq was born in 1955 in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif, Balkh province. He reportedly attained a bachelor's degree in Islamic Studies from Iran. He speaks Farsi, along with Uzbek and Arabic. He joined mujahideen resistance forces in 1978, soon after the Saur Revolution that placed a communist government in power in April of that year ([Afghan Bios](#), February 2, 2020).

Little information is available that describes Mohaqiq's activities during the Soviet-Afghan War, but he rose to prominence in its immediate aftermath. Following the Soviet retreat, Mohaqiq became a leader of Hezb-e Wahdat, an Islamist political party that aimed to represent Afghanistan's Hazara community. From his perch in Hezb-e Wahdat, Mohaqiq was an important Hazara leader in the Northern Alliance during the Afghan civil war of the 1990s. After the fall of the Taliban government following the invasion by the U.S.-led coalition in 2001, Mohaqiq was appointed to the position of vice president and minister of planning in Hamid Karzai's interim government. He ran for

the presidency in 2004 against Karzai, and came in third with approximately 11 percent of the vote. Mohaqiq supported Karzai in the 2009 election, but ended his support in 2010. He became a harsh critic of the administration, citing Karzai's attempts to negotiate with the Taliban as a betrayal that was doomed to failure ([Afghan Bios](#), February 2, 2020).

In 2011, Mohaqiq formed a new political party, Jabha-e Milli-e Afghanistan (National Front of Afghanistan), alongside fellow anti-Taliban warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum and Ahmad Zia Massoud ([RFE/RL](#), November 11, 2011).

Having supported Abdullah in the 2014 elections, Mohaqiq became his chief deputy when Abdullah was placed in the position of chief executive in a power sharing agreement with Ghani, following those contentious elections. Mohaqiq operated in this position until January 2019, when President Ghani attempted to fire him. Ghani's office cited Mohaqiq's intensive lobbying for Iranian interests as the reason for his dismissal ([Salaam Times](#), February 8, 2019). This episode followed years of Mohaqiq expressing pro-Iranian views. The Shia Hazara leader met with Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in November 2017 and again in November 2018. Ghani reappointed Mohaqiq as an adviser in January 2021 ([Gandhara](#), January 14).

Mohaqiq ignited a political scandal when, on November 26, 2017, he praised the people from Afghanistan who participated in the Syrian civil war. The "Fatemiyoun Brigade" consists of Shia Afghan refugees and immigrants to Iran and was formed in 2014 by the Iranian government to fight in Syria on behalf of President Bashar al-

Assad. A video of the remarks, made during Mohaqiq's trip to Tehran, leaked online. Both Ghani and Abdullah's offices reiterated the government's position that it does not support its citizens taking part in foreign wars ([Salaam Times](#), December 1, 2017).

Mohaqiq is one of the many Afghan warlords who in the last few weeks have attempted to mobilize their old militias as part of the "public uprising forces" that fought Taliban fighters before the fall of Kabul ([ANI News](#), August 11; [Times of Israel](#), August 12). Mohaqiq, alongside Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Mohammad Noor, attempted to mobilize their militias in Balkh province, before it fell to the Taliban on August 14 ([al-Jazeera](#), August 14).

As Kabul fell, Mohaqiq took to social media, claiming in a Facebook post that, "People were saved," and that the Afghan government was corrupt. Some analysts speculated that this was an attempt by Mohaqiq to soften his own image and make himself an acceptable political leader to be included in any potential transition government established by the Taliban in Kabul ([Twitter.com/EzzatMehrddad](#), August 19). However, the Taliban's acceptance of Mohaqiq could prove unlikely, given his decades-long history as a major anti-Taliban commander and status as a Shia Hazara. Some of Mohaqiq's fellow warlords that were formerly part of the Northern Alliance, including Atta Mohammad Noor, have sworn to continue fighting the Taliban ([Khaama News Agency](#), August 15).

Mohaqiq's current position in the fast-moving and dangerous Afghan political scene is in flux. His recent actions indicate that he might be willing to cut a deal with the Taliban and be

included in a potential power-sharing government. However, his long history of fighting the Taliban could make this proposition unlikely, or at least untenable in the long-term. For the Taliban to consolidate power, however, they will need to entice influential ethnic minority figures like Mohaqiq. Failure to do so will allow Mohaqiq and other warlords to gather their militias and engage in a civil war against the Taliban. As many world governments and media organizations speculate on how the Taliban will form a new government and the level to which opposition figures will be allowed influence, Mohaqiq will be an important figure to watch. His inclusion in a Taliban-led government would be substantial, given his past and ethnic and religious background. He is among the most influential of the Hazara politicians in Afghanistan, so his inclusion in or exclusion from a Taliban-led power sharing government will be a harbinger of the movement's trajectory.

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## **U.S. Designation Revives Concerns Over Ikrima, the Deadly al-Shabaab Strategist**

*Sunguta West*

On August 6, the United States designated al-Shabaab leaders Ali Mohammed Raga, a.k.a Ali Dheere, and Abdikadir Mohamed Abdikadir, a.k.a Ikrima, as global terrorists in response to terrorism activities in Kenya and Somalia.

The designation came at a time when the Somali-based militant group had stepped up attacks in northern Kenya and southern Somalia ([Daily Nation](#), June 7).

Dheere is the long-serving commander and spokesman of al-Shabaab, while Ikrima is a commander and strategist leading the group's intelligence wing—Amniyat. The two are hardliners and deadly jihadists within the Somali-based militant group and the al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa.

Whereas Dheere has remained visible, the designation revived security concerns on Ikrima. The latter has been linked to several bloody attacks in Kenya and Somalia, and massive recruitment and facilitation of foreign fighters into al-Shabaab.

In recent times, Ikrima has kept a low profile, but he is believed to have had a hand in every attack in northern Kenya and Nairobi. He rose to fame as a terrorist after the Nairobi Westgate shopping mall attack on September 21, 2013. The terrorist attack he planned—one of the deadliest in the East African nation—killed at least 70 people and wounded around 200 others. It also drew the attention of the international community to the growing al-Shabaab terrorist threat in East Africa.

The U.S. designation describes Ikrima as a facilitator and operational planner, who by 2019 was a senior al-Shabaab leader, serving as the head of operations and logistics within the militant group ([Daily Nation](#), August 10).

Ikrima was born in Kenya around 1979 in a middle-class Kenyan Somali business family. Some reports suggest he was born in 1985. A news report recently claimed that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) trained Ikrima, giving him resources to infiltrate al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda in Yemen, but the militant turned against the agency and used their resources for terrorism ([Daily Nation](#), July 2, 2020).

He started his early life in Eastleigh, a neighborhood in Nairobi often referred to as Little Mogadishu due to its high concentration of ethnic Somali. His family had arrived in the neighborhood in the 1990s from Mombasa, when he was between four to seven years old ([The Standard](#), March 22, 2014).

Standing at just over five feet, at the Eastleigh, the young Ikrima has been described as a talkative, skinny young man who preferred playing football, smoking bhang and chewing khat, to attending madrassas. He is also said to have worn stylish clothing, and frequented dance clubs ([Daily Nation](#), July 2, 2020).

After initially failing to gain admission into university after high school, the jihadist was able to attend a college where he studied computers and French. In 2004, he travelled to Norway seeking asylum. He was unsuccessful, and by 2007 he had lived in London for approximately six months before moving to Somalia either later that year or early 2008.

His young friends have said in new reports that, after disappearing from Eastleigh, they later heard about him in 2012 after the kidnapping of

the French spy Denis Alex. With knowledge in several languages, Ikrima is believed to be fluent in English, Kiswahili, Arabic, French and Norwegian. He also speaks his native Somali dialect. These talents have made him useful in al-Shabaab's kidnappings.

Ikrima is described as a short man with medium-long hair, who has a thick dark moustache. He is missing three fingers on his left hand.

After training, he rose through the ranks within al-Shabaab to become a commander and a strategist within al-Shabaab's intelligence wing—Amniyat. His work was to make plans, but he was never involved in the actual fighting on the ground.

In January 2020, Ikrima escaped the joint African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and Somali Special Forces operation targeting him. The operation led to the capture of his wife ([Kenya Mails](#), January 10, 2020).

In 2017, the Kenya government placed a bounty of \$19,200 on Ikrima along with another four suspects, who had allegedly sneaked into the country to carry out attacks. Three years earlier in 2014, the U.S. government had placed a \$9 million bounty on Ikrima, alongside two others—Jafar and Yasin Kilwe—who were involved in the attack on Westgate, an upscale shopping mall. Each had attracted bounties of \$3 million. Ikrima is believed to have been the mastermind of the shopping mall attack. During the attack on the mall on September 21, 2013, Ikrima was sitting in a fortified compound in the al-Shabaab-controlled town of Barawe, receiving calls from the attackers in the mall.

U.S. Navy Seals had attempted to arrest Ikrima, arriving at the seaport town under cover of darkness. Although they could see Ikrima through a window, the forces could not arrest

him since he was protected by dozens of fighters, and surrounded by women and children ([The Standard](#), March 22, 2014).

Security agencies link Ikrima to Mohammed Fazul and Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, two deceased Al-Qaeda terrorists. The two reportedly played a key role in the bombing of the U.S embassy in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998 and the 2002 attack on Israeli targets in Mombasa.

A master planner and strategist, Ikrima has proved his abilities to plan and organize attacks beyond Somalia. His mastery of several languages makes it easier for him to move, interact and hide.

However, the jihadist remains a great asset for al-Shabaab and as security agencies continue to seek his arrest, the militant group is likely to continue investing heavily on his security. His current public silence should cause great concern for local and international security agencies.

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## **Pakistani Separatist Renounces Anti-State Activities: Abdul Hameed Khan**

*Syed Fazl-e-Haider*

On July 3, Abdul Hameed Khan, the former chief of the outlawed Balawaristan National Front (BNF Hameed group or BNF-H) formally announced his return to politics in Pakistan's northern Gilgit-Baltistan region. In his statement, Hameed said that he would abandon divisive politics and apologized for engaging in anti-state activities in the past. He expressed gratitude to the courts for their leniency in granting him bail and returning his properties. He also thanked both the civilian and military leadership for facilitating his return to Pakistan from self-imposed exile in Europe ([The Nation](#), July 4).

Abdul Hameed Khan is a nationalist leader and the head of the banned BNF-H group in Gilgit-Baltistan region. He was a resident of Yasin Valley in the region's Ghizer district. He formed BNF-H in 1995 and fled the country in 1999. Hameed had been struggling for two decades toward the creation of "Balawaristan"—an independent state in the current Gilgit-Baltistan that comprises the northern mountain regions of Pakistan. While in self-imposed exile in Europe, Hameed continued his advocacy for an independent Gilgit-Baltistan and frequently criticized Islamabad until 2020, when he announced that he was abandoning his movement.

## Who is Abdul Hameed Khan?

Hameed was born in July 1953 in the Yasin valley, located in the Ghizer district of Gilgit-Baltistan. The Ghizer district has historically been a center for Gilgit-Baltistani nationalism, and a majority of its population follows the Ismaili sect of Shia Islam. Though information on Hameed's upbringing is sparse, he formed the BNF organization on December 28, 1989, alongside Nawaz Khan Naji, Mohammad Rafiq and Shujaat Ali. Hameed broke away from the organization in 1995, forming BNF-H, due to BNF leader Naji's attempt to limit the more extreme Hameed's activities. Hameed sought to push for greater autonomy from the Islamabad government, while Naji was more moderate ([The News](#), May 26, 2019). While Hameed fled the country in 1999 to advocate his position from abroad, Naji successfully ran for a seat in the Gilgit-Baltistan legislative assembly on April 29, 2011 ([The Express Tribune](#), April 30, 2011).

In 1999, Hameed began his long-term exile by first transitioning to Nepal, where Pakistani security officials allege that he made contact with agents from India's intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), after which they relocated him to New Delhi. Hameed's family, including his three sons, were also shifted to India, where they were given Indian citizenship. Pakistani security officials have also stated that RAW allegedly paid the costs for the education of Hameed's sons in India ([The News](#), May 26, 2019). [1]

In 2007, Hameed relocated to Belgium to advocate among Western audiences for greater autonomy for Gilgit-Baltistan. In April 2010, for example, he testified to the UK House of Lords on the state of human rights in Gilgit-Baltistan

and advocated against the creation of six dams in the region ([unpro.org](#), April 9, 2010). He also wrote to the International Monetary Fund, requesting that they not provide technical and financial assistance to the Pakistani government for the construction of those six dams ([Business Recorder](#), May 21, 2019).

## Hameed's Alleged Involvement in Terrorist Activity

In January 2017, Pakistani authorities reportedly foiled a terrorist plan to sabotage the development projects related to the \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), when 14 BNF-H activists were arrested and a huge quantity of weapons seized during a raid in the Ghizer district of Gilgit-Baltistan. The police seized eight Kalashnikovs, 12 shotguns and a number of 7mm guns and pistols during the raid. Anti-Pakistan literature was also found on the scene. Local police authorities once again claimed Indian involvement ([Dawn](#), January 19, 2017).

Pakistan's intelligence agencies also stopped the group from setting up an FM radio channel to broadcast anti-state propaganda. The student wing of BNF-H, the Balawaristan National Students Organization (BNSO), headed by Sher Nadir Shahi, played a key role in recruiting local students from Gilgit-Baltistan to join the BNF-H. Nadir Shahi surrendered to Pakistani authorities a month after Hameed, in March 2019 ([The News](#), May 26, 2019).

According to Pakistan's intelligence and security authorities, Hameed also carried out his anti-state activities in Nepal, Thailand and Bangladesh in 2013, meeting people from Gilgit-Baltistan there and organizing his group. A

police investigation revealed that Hameed disbursed huge amounts of money among his workers in Pakistan with an aim of purchasing arms, organizing the group, publishing anti-state literature and halting work on projects under the CPEC program ([Dawn](#), January 19, 2017).

In February 2019, Pakistan's National Counter Terrorism Authority (NCTA) banned BNF-H and declared it a proscribed organization for its alleged involvement in terrorism. Pakistani authorities accused the group of working against the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The group, however, argued that it was targeted for its nationalistic approach and ideological struggle for an independent state of Gilgit-Baltistan ([Pamir Times](#), March 6, 2019).

### **Hameed's U-turn and his Return from Europe**

Hameed was taken into custody by the Pakistani authorities when he returned home from Europe in February 2019 after spending 20 years in self-imposed exile. However, in September 2020, Hameed renounced his group's decades-long separatist ideology during a press conference at a local hotel in Gilgit-Baltistan. In his statement to the local media, he claimed that he was formerly paid 25,000 euros a month by India's intelligence agency to create unrest in Gilgit-Baltistan. Hameed told the media that he spent the funds to support local students. He also stated that he was misled by the intelligence agency and apologized to the nation for his involvement in anti-state activities ([Pamir Times](#), September, 10, 2020).

Hameed's statements in September 2020 represented a dramatic U-turn from his the

separatist, anti-state ideology that he had been preaching for the last 20 years. For example, in 2008, while in exile, he made an online address to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, stating:

"As you know that I did not leave my country because of the livelihood of me or my children, but because to save my life as well as the lives of 2 million enslaved people of this region. I have to inform the international community about the misery caused due to the illegal occupation of Pakistan since 16 November 1947. This will be your assessment and you are the judge, whether I have been able to put your case in good direction or not" ([Intellibriefs](#), June 10, 2008).

### **Conclusion**

Abdul Hameed Khan's sudden U-turn on the issue of an independent Gilgit-Baltistan and his surrender to Pakistani authorities might be the result of a secret deal the security establishment. Hameed may have been given amnesty and the opportunity to take part in mainstream electoral politics in the Gilgit-Baltistan region in exchange for abandoning anti-state activities, blaming Indian intelligence agencies and demonstrating loyalty to Pakistan.

Gilgit-Baltistan is a region of immense geopolitical importance due to its strategic location. China has taken a keen interest in connecting its northwestern province of Xinjiang to the Arabian Sea by building a network of highways, railways and energy pipelines to Gwadar port. This network will have to transit

Gilgit-Baltistan. As these projects continue to develop, Chinese and Pakistani economic interests will be tied up in a region with demonstrable separatist tendencies. Abdul Hameed Khan, as the longtime voice of this movement, could thus have an outsized role as either a potential spoiler or important partner in the region's economic development.

## Notes

[1] Pakistani authorities have frequently blamed RAW for supporting separatist activists, activities and terrorist attacks in the country. Recently, Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi blamed RAW for the July 14 explosion of a bus traveling through Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province that killed 13 people, nine of whom were Chinese. Most independent analysis has placed the blame for that attack on Tehreek-e-Taliban, which is known to operate in the area where the explosion took place ([SCMP](#), August 13).

## Boko Haram's Bakuras: The Commander and Cleric Reviving Abubakar Shekau's Legacy

*Jacob Zenn*

On June 25, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) released a video through Islamic State (IS) media channels. It was the first formal video the group had released in more than a year, indicating that this rare release featured important content. The video showed fighters from ISWAP's former rival faction, Jamaat Ahlus-Sunna li-Dawa wal-Jihad (JAS), acknowledging "mistakes" that had prevented them from unifying with ISWAP ([Telegram](#), June 25). However, as a result of ISWAP's near-capture of JAS leader Abubakar Shekau weeks earlier, during which Shekau blew himself up, JAS fighters could now unite under ISWAP ([HumAngle.ng](#), May 20). Thus, ISWAP and the now former JAS fighters pledged loyalty to IS in the June 25 video.

Just over ten days before that video's release, on June 14, Shekau loyalists released their own video claiming to continue the deceased Shekau's mission. The speaker, Bakura Sahalaba, also asserted his loyalty, and that of the several dozen fighters with him in the video, to IS. However, Sahalaba called on IS to recognize Sahalaba's fighters, and thus the late Shekau's loyalists in JAS, as the true IS province, and not ISWAP ([Telegram](#), June 14). If approved, this would have put ISWAP under Sahalaba's leadership.

Thus, there was a stark contradiction between the June 25 and June 14 videos: one set of (former) JAS fighters was joining ISWAP and



another (current) set of JAS fighters was opposing ISWAP. However, both sets of fighters proclaimed loyalty to IS. The contradiction can be reconciled by the fact that the fighters joining ISWAP were from Shekau's main JAS base in Sambisa Forest, Borno State, while those opposing ISWAP, including Sahalaba, were from JAS' Lake Chad faction. The latter faction, including Sahalaba and another militant named Bakura—Bakura Doro—were among the only JAS fighters refusing to reintegrate with ISWAP after Shekau's death.

### **Who is Bakura Sahalaba?**

ISWAP's leaders from Nigeria, such as Abu Musab al-Barnawi, or even JAS's Nigerian leaders like Shekau, were tied to Boko Haram founder Muhammed Yusuf. Al-Barnawi and Shekau were his son and deputy, respectively. Their backgrounds accordingly are relatively transparent. However, being from Niger, with no known ties to Yusuf or Yusuf's following from before 2010, when the group was above-ground, Sahalaba's upbringing and background are not well-known. Although he is believed to be from Niger, he only attracted significant attention after the June 25 video release, when he was described as "the top cleric in the pro-Shekau Bakura Doro faction operating on Lake Chad [who] were the ones who reportedly launched an attack against ISWAP on Lake [Chad] after ISWAP's push into Sambisa" ([Twitter.com/VincentFoucher](https://twitter.com/VincentFoucher), June 14).

Nevertheless, Sahalaba's voice in the June 25 video closely resembled that of a cleric from two other JAS videos that were released during Shekau's lifetime. Both videos were also consistent with Sahalaba's location around Lake Chad with the other Bakura—Bakura Doro.

One video, on September 24, 2019, featured Sahalaba, based on the sound of his voice and particularly his classical Arabic speech, which were the same as the voice in the June 25 video. In that September 24, 2019 JAS-branded video, Sahalaba declared loyalty to Abubakar Shekau of fighters in Lake Chad ([Telegram](https://t.me/Telegram), September 24, 2019). This came one day after Shekau himself issued a video announcing that he had accepted pledges of loyalty from fighters on Lake Chad ([Telegram](https://t.me/Telegram), September 23, 2019). The timing of these videos was evidently coordinated.

The two videos together heralded the launch of Shekau's "affiliate system," in which, other pledges of loyalty to Shekau eventually came from fighters in Cameroon and Katsina and Niger states in northwestern Nigeria ([Terrorism Monitor](https://www.terrorism-monitor.com), January 15). However, Sahalaba's Lake Chad faction was the most effective of all the JAS factions outside Sambisa Forest. The Lake Chad faction, for example, conducted the March 2020 massacre of more than 90 Chadian soldiers ([aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com), March 25, 2020). The Cameroon faction, in contrast, specialized in raiding villages, while the northwestern Nigerian affiliates remained relatively inactive or were struggling to merge with bandit groups and turn them into bona fide jihadist entities.

On November 5, 2019, JAS again released another video from Lake Chad in which a cleric with the same voice as Sahalaba's claimed a JAS attack in Maiduguri and others in Nigerien, Chadian and Cameroonian areas around Lake Chad ([Telegram](https://t.me/Telegram), November 5, 2019). As in the September 24 video, in which Sahalaba wore clerical garb and stood beside two armed and uniformed fighters, in this November 5 video he was also next to two armed and uniformed

fighters, but there were also two (presumably captured) sport-utility vehicles behind them. However, what was most notable about the November 5 video was that Sahalaba mentioned they were “commanded by Bakura,” which indicates that this “Bakura” was not Salahaba himself, but another Bakura, namely Bakura Doro.

### **Who is Bakura Doro?**

Bakura Doro, like Bakura Sahalaba, has a poorly understood background, but is believed to come from somewhere near Lake Chad in Niger, such as N’Guigmi or Doron Baga. His faction’s attacks, accordingly, have taken place mostly around his hometown near Lake Chad. Among these attacks were one in Bula Bulin, Niger, which Sahalaba claimed in the November 5, 2019 video, and others around Lake Chad ([Twitter.com/UnMecEnAfrique](https://twitter.com/UnMecEnAfrique), May 20, 2020; [rfi.fr](http://rfi.fr), January 31, 2020 ). However, the most prominent attack commanded by Bakura Doro was the March 20 killing of more than 90 soldiers at a Chadian military base, which JAS recorded and publicized in a brutal video ([Terrorism Monitor](https://www.terrorism-monitor.com), January 28, 2020; [Telegram](https://www.telegram.com), May 8, 2020).

The second most lethal attack commanded by Bakura Doro, which Sahalaba also claimed in the November 5, 2019 video, was in Darak, Cameroon, in June 2019. In that attack, a reported 300 fighters attacked the Cameroonian base on Darak, an island in Lake Chad, and killed several dozen soldiers ([aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com), June 12, 2019). The fact that Bakura Doro could command that many fighters in one attack indicates that there were perhaps as many as 500 total fighters, if not more, under his command.

Bakura Doro also became known for raiding villages and carrying out abductions of villagers—especially women in southeastern Niger—and also feuded with ISWAP ([icct.nl](https://www.icct.nl), February 2021). Unlike JAS, ISWAP objected to the “enslavement” of Muslim women, who were simply not fighting the jihad. These feuds continued after Shekau’s death, as Bakura’s fighters sought revenge against ISWAP for causing the death of their leader. JAS even abducted the wives and daughters of ISWAP fighters in Niger ([Telegram](https://www.telegram.com), June 21).

While Bakura Doro was reportedly killed sometime in early 2020, that was never verified, and he has never appeared in a video and his face is unknown to the public ([Jeune Afrique](https://www.jeuneafrique.com), May 19, 2020). Therefore, even today it is unknown whether he is alive or dead. The fact that he is known for targeting ISWAP, and that such attacks have continued since Shekau’s death, nevertheless indicates he is still alive ([crisisgroup.org](https://www.crisisgroup.org), April 6, 2020). As can be seen by his attack repertoire, with targets including ISWAP and women for enslavement, as well as more conventional adversaries like Nigeria, Chadian, Cameroonian and Nigerien soldiers, Bakura fit the Shekau mold and carried out attacks similar in style to the now deceased JAS leader, albeit around Lake Chad. Either Bakura Doro or Bakura Salahaba will continue Shekau’s legacy.

### **Conclusion**

As the conflict between ISWAP and JAS enters a new post-Shekau phase, the two Bakuras can be expected to play an increasingly important role in the broader insurgent picture in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. ISWAP has acquired renewed strength as a result of incorporating

Shekau's fighters in Sambisa Forest. At the same time, JAS attacks in Cameroon, and specifically raids on villages, have sharply fallen since Shekau's death, which indicates that Shekau's fighters in Cameroon have likely been joining ISWAP. Given that JAS under Shekau's leadership was never particularly active in northwestern Nigeria, this leaves the two heads of JAS around Lake Chad, the "commander" Bakura Doro and "cleric" Bakura Sahalaba, as the remaining leaders holding out from joining ISWAP.

The two Bakuras, therefore, are not only preventing the unity of the jihadist movement in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, but also making it more difficult for IS to fulfil its own objectives of placing all jihadists in the region under Abu Musab al-Barnawi's command. For his part, al-Barnawi was again designated ISWAP leader just weeks before the offensive that led to Shekau's death ([Telegram](#), May 2021). Al-Barnawi had been named ISWAP leader in August 2016 by IS and he deposed Shekau, but was removed from the ISWAP leadership in March 2019 by an internal purge that IS did not authorize ([france24.com](#), March 15, 2019). With IS favoring al-Barnawi and al-Barnawi hostile towards JAS, he will likely take the battle now to Lake Chad to eliminate JAS remnants under the leadership of the two Bakuras, if not also to take revenge for their continued abductions of ISWAP family members.

In the short-term, while Bakura Doro will likely remain out of the public spotlight, assuming he is still alive, Bakura Salahaba will become the new "face" of JAS. He will appear in the group's videos and carry on Shekau's legacy more than anyone else in JAS. However, Sahalaba lacks the

ties that Shekau had to Yusuf, not to mention Shekau's megalomaniacal charisma. Therefore, it is uncertain, and perhaps unlikely, that Sahalaba will inspire new recruits or withstand inevitable pressure from ISWAP, which will be backed by IS. ISWAP will seek to locate Salahaba and make him face the same fate as Shekau.

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## Abu Zar Al-Burmi—The Ideologue Spearheading an Anti-China Message and Reinvigorating the Pakistani Taliban

*Animesh Roul*

On August 26, a prominent jihadist ideologue affiliated with al-Qaeda and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Mufti Abu Zar-al-Burmi (hereafter Abu Zar), issued a congratulatory audio-visual statement praising the Taliban for reestablishing Islamic rule in Afghanistan. While he vehemently criticized Islamic State (IS) for its hasty and brutal method of establishing the caliphate, he complimented the Taliban for its battlefield prowess, strict adherence to religious principles, and dedication to Islamic Sharia. Abu Zar's statement came following the TTP's renewed pledge of allegiance toward the Afghan Taliban on August 17. It essentially signifies the position of pro-Taliban militant factions like TTP, which received a moral and operational boost with the establishment of the Taliban emirate in neighboring Afghanistan after almost twenty years. To the chagrin of Pakistan and its 'all-weather' partner China, Abu Zar's recent pro-Taliban utterances signal the looming threat of instability in the region.

### Who Is Abu Zar al-Burmi?

Abu Zar (a.k.a Abu-Zar Azzam/Abu Zar Pakistani/Abu Zar Khanjari), a prominent 'refugee mujahideen' based in Pakistan was born in 1982 in Myanmar's Rakhine state (Arakan, Burma). [1] Though not much detail is available about his childhood years in Myanmar, he was brought up and educated in the Pakistani city of Karachi. He claimed that he received military training under the Islamic Emirate of

Afghanistan way back in 1997. In 2000, Abu Zar graduated from Jamia Farooqia Islamic seminary in Karachi and in the following year, he joined the department of teaching and writing at the same seminary. He claimed that he met Libyan al-Qaeda ideologue Sheikh Abu Yahya Libi in 2002. Abu Zar entered the world of jihad in 2004, following the footsteps of Naik Muhammad, Baitullah Mehsud and Maulana Hameed-ur-Rehman after he relocated to the Waziristan region. During that time, Waziristan was teeming with foreign fighters from Central Asia. These fighters were from Uzbekistan, Xinjiang, Iran and Tajikistan and were regrouping after the US-led invasion of neighboring Afghanistan ([Telegram](#), August 31, 2019).

Well-versed in Islamic jurisprudence and fluent in several languages such as Arabic, Urdu, Uzbeki, Pashto and Arakanese, Abu Zar became connected with several jihadist factions active in Pakistan's Waziristan region. He wore multiple hats during this time, maintaining ties with al-Qaeda, TTP, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). He was appointed as Mufti of the IMU in 2011. Abu Zar's association with Taliban's Qari Zafar group and with a faction of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, which is believed to have been active between 2010 and 2013, is shrouded in mystery ([Express Tribune](#), August 20, 2011; [DNA India](#), March 2, 2010). However, media sources in Pakistan identified Abu Zar-al-Burmi as 'Hifzullah' who propounded various illegal practices as 'Islamic.' According to him, the practice of robbing banks is 'legal' as this is the right of mujahideen to take '*Maal-e-Ghanimat*' (spoils of war). He also put forward a theory that "emptying Pakistani banks is jihad as

the money has been made by selling (or handing over) Mujahideen fighters to the U.S.” Abu Zar reportedly defended the practice of kidnapping people for ransom and termed the Pakistani military as apostates for conducting operations in the tribal areas, accepting aid from the United States and killing Muslims ([Express Tribune](#), August 20, 2011).

His multiple associations with militant groups in Pakistan notwithstanding, his speeches are released regularly by affiliated jihadist media units and independently, including through IMU's Jundullah media, Islam Awazi, and TTP's Umar Studio ([Jihadology](#), June 13, 2018; [Telegram](#), August 27). Abu Zar briefly joined Islamic State Khorasan province (IS-K) **in late 2014**, but returned to the TTP fold, disenchanted with the former's violent sectarian ideals and anti-Taliban diatribes ([Jihadology](#), August 28, 2016).

Abu Zar's close ties with TTP commander Umar Mansoor cemented his position as a prominent religious scholar within the group. Abu Zar supported all of Umar Mansoor's heinous terrorist attacks in Pakistan, including the December 2014 attack on the Army Public School massacre near Peshawar, the January 2016 Bacha Khan University (Charsadda) attack, and the shooting of Malala Yousufzai in October 2012 ([Al Jazeera](#), February 6, 2016). Abu Zar often brags about his association with the infamous Taliban commander Qari Hussain, who was a student in Abu Zar's Karachi seminary. Hussain reportedly trained the Jordanian suicide bomber who killed seven Americans in Afghanistan in 2009 ([Dawn](#), January 20, 2011; [Jihad Blog](#), February 7, 2012). Hussain was infamous as a ‘*Ustad-i-*

*Fedayeen'* (teacher of suicide bombers), who trained young boys as suicide bombers for Taliban and al-Qaeda in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

### **China in the Crosshairs**

In Pakistan, jihadist groups of all hues—including al-Qaeda, TTP, IMU, Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), and others—have remain focused on Chinese atrocities against ethnic Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang province. Abu Zar has occupied a prominent position as an ideologue motivating the increasing anti-China rhetoric in the region. He is believed to be influential within the contingent of foreign fighters in the Waziristan region, primarily because of his multilingual sermons and speeches, which he performs in Arabic, Urdu, Arakanese and Uzbek. Abu Zar's clout within al-Qaeda and TTP remains immense.

He predicted that the U.S. pull-out from Afghanistan would be a victory for the Taliban movement in the region, and the next jihadist target would be China for its atrocities against minority Muslims. In a 2014 message titled "Let's disturb China," Mufti Abu Zar called for Taliban groups to target Chinese interests in the region ([Friday Times](#), May 23, 2014). A recent spate of terrorist attacks against Chinese nationals in Pakistan brought attention to a resurgent and united TTP and firebrand jihadist ideologues like Abu Zar. The Pakistani Taliban claimed a suicide bombing on April 21 at Quetta's Serena Hotel, where the Chinese Ambassador Nong Rong and his delegation were staying ([SCMP](#), April 22). On July 14, another similar suicide attack killed 9 Chinese nationals in Dasu in Upper Kohistan, in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Though no terrorist group claimed the Dasu attack, Pakistani authorities blamed TTP's Swat chapter in which

Abu Zar is affiliated ([Dawn](#), August 13). A month before the Serena hotel suicide attack, Abu Zar, reportedly incited Taliban militants in Pakistan through an audio statement in March to target Chinese interests in the region due to the ongoing atrocities against Uyghur Muslims, particularly citing the treatment of women by Chinese authorities ([Gandhara](#), May 18).

### **Anti-Myanmar Sentiments**

Abu Zar, who is originally from Myanmar's restive Rakhine state, often calls for Muslims to wage jihad against the Buddhist-majority country. His landmark statement, titled 'A Lost People: About the Tragedies of Burma,' under the banner of IMU's Jundallah studio in November 2012 started a pro-Rohingya jihadist wave across the South and Southeast Asia region. In this message, he denounced Myanmar's military junta and targeted China and Germany for purportedly supporting the Rohingya genocide in that country. Abu Zar particularly mentioned then-German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle for ignoring human rights violations and supporting a newly adopted reform process in the country.

Abu Zar urged the Muslim Ummah and fellow mujahideen fighters to support Rohingya' brothers and sisters' and called for the waging of jihad against the 'polytheist' Buddhists. He called for acts of violence to take place in Myanmar, China and Germany and the targeting of their interests abroad. He even accused the UN of supporting the massacres in Rakhine state. In that message, Abu Zar warned fellow Islamist militants that China would be the future enemy of the global Muslim Ummah ([Jihadology](#), December 2, 2012).

With intermittent incitement against Myanmar's government, Abu Zar-al-Burmi was instrumental in bringing the Rohingya issue to the forefront of the jihadist milieu. Subsequently, the TTP and al-Qaeda, along with various militant factions, raised their voices unequivocally in support of Rohingya in the region. Abu Zar's persistent pro-Rohingya and anti-Burmese and anti-Buddhist propaganda gained momentum and became a rallying point for jihadist groups in the region.

### **Conclusion**

Abu Zar's allegiance toward the TTP and al-Qaeda remains intact and robust, even though he deviated briefly in 2014 by joining IS-Khorasan (IS-K), though he disassociated himself from the organization in 2016. The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan has undoubtedly emboldened TTP and its factions in Pakistan. Influential senior Islamic jihadist ideologues like Abu Zar-al-Burmi, who commands respect within diverse militant circles in the region, could play a pivotal role in reinvigorating the Taliban movement in Pakistan, who seek to emulate the success of their counterparts in Afghanistan.

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### **Notes**

[1] Arif Rafiq, "Sunni Deobandi-Shi'i Sectarian Violence in Pakistan

Explaining the Resurgence Since 2007", Middle East Institute, December 2014, <https://>

[www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Arif%20Rafiq%20report.pdf](http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Arif%20Rafiq%20report.pdf)

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