



# MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

## Personalities Behind the Insurgency

BRIEF

From “Jihad of Open Fronts” to Lone Wolf Attacks —The Enduring Legacy of al-Qaeda’s Abu Musab al-Suri

JOHN FOULKES

HALLA DIYAB

Mufti Amir Hamza Fuels Bangladeshi Extremism Through ‘Wa’z Mehfil’s

ANIMESH ROUL

Will This Chechen Warlord be Forced out of Idlib? A Profile of Muslim Abu Walid al-Shishani

VALERY DZUTSATI

Why are Indian Security Officials Talking to Taliban Leader Khairullah Khairkhwa?

SUDHA RAMACHANDRAN

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#### Back to the Herat Frontlines: The Return of Ismael Khan

*John Foulkes*

On July 9, as the Taliban made rapid gains in the western Afghan province of Herat, Ismael Khan vowed to raise a civilian militia and push back the insurgent organization. In the 24 hours before Khan’s remarks, the Taliban had captured eight districts in Herat province, including the Islam Qala border crossing with Iran. In remarks to the media, Khan stated, “We will reorganize the war fronts. We will save the city of Herat from those who have the order to plunder the city. We will not let them [follow] their dreams [of] plundering Herat into reality.” Khan has reportedly gathered hundreds of his loyalists into “uprising” forces to stem the dramatic advance by the Taliban insurgency, and is directing their movements from near the frontlines ([The News](#), July 10).

Khan is a veteran warlord who has for decades been a prominent figure in Afghan politics and is deeply influential in Herat. As the Afghanistan’s

security continues to break down, Khan will play a prominent role in resisting the Taliban in this strategic province.

Khan is an ethnic Tajik who was born in 1946 in the Shindand district of Herat province. By 1979, he was a captain in the 17th Division of the Afghan National Army ([The Wire](#), April 15). This division was charged with breaking up a rebellion in Herat in March 1979, which was fighting against the then-Communist government, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Instead, the division mutinied and assisted the local insurgents in taking the city. Government forces overtook the city in only a few days, resulting in Ismael Khan and other rebel leaders fleeing to the countryside to further organize the burgeoning insurgency ([Afghan Bios](#), October 18, 2018). The Herat uprising was a key event in the lead up to the wider civil war and Soviet invasion of the country.

Khan was and is a member of the Jamiat-e-Islami party, an influential political organization today and a major mujahideen group during the Soviet-Afghan war. It is a predominantly Tajik

organization based in the west and north of Afghanistan. During the course of the conflict, Khan rose up in the party to become the leader of its western command, largely overseeing the organization's operations in Herat province ([Afghan Bios](#), October 18, 2018).

In 1992, Khan's forces captured Herat city as the government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan fell apart, when he became governor of the province. He was ousted from the city by the Taliban in 1995, however, and fled into Iran, where he regrouped. He continued fighting Taliban forces until he was captured in 1997. He escaped prison in 2000 and fought with the support of U.S. and NATO forces during the invasion that followed the 9/11 attacks. Khan took over Herat in November 2001, and immediately went to work establishing his control of the province. Calling himself the "Emir of Herat" he placed family and members of his militia into governing positions, and used the revenues from the border crossings with Iran and Turkmenistan to fund public works and government employees. He reportedly also enriched himself substantially during his time as governor, increasing tensions with the Kabul government, which claimed ownership of the border crossing revenue that he controlled. [1]

Accused of running the province like his private fiefdom, Khan was forced out of his position in 2004 by rival militia leaders. He accepted a cabinet position in the administration of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, becoming the Minister of Water and Energy in 2005. Khan operated in this position for nearly ten years, exiting in 2013 in the final months of the Karzai administration ([TOLO News](#), December 2, 2012). The following administration of President Ashraf Ghani curtailed the influence of warlords. Leaders of the anti-Soviet mujahideen forces

such as Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Mohammad Noor were forced out of positions of authority ([Commentaries](#), October 2, 2018; [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), July 6).

During his time in the political wilderness and without an official position in the government, and from his powerful home base of Herat, Khan openly criticized Ghani for not including the leaders of the mujahideen resistance in his government. In interviews, he expressed disappointment at not being allowed to continue in his position of Minister of Water and Energy under Ghani. Khan continues to be a prominent critic of the Ghani administration today, often meeting with both local and foreign media outlets to criticize government policies ([Bangkok Post](#), June 19, 2015; [Khaama Press](#), February 9, 2015). He was also a frequent critic of the Ghani government's approach to the peace negotiation and has stated that the deal the United States completed with the Taliban in February 2019 gave too much up to the insurgent group ([TOLO News](#), May 13, 2020; [The Wire](#), April 15).

Today, the 75-year-old Khan has reemerged to once again fight the Taliban. The uprising he now leads in the western province are fighting the Taliban. The nation's third-largest, Herat has largely become surrounded by Taliban forces, as the insurgency has seized several of the surrounding districts ([NDTV](#), July 30). However, the situation is reportedly more stable in Herat than it is in Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province that is experiencing a significant Taliban offensive. Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and Khan's militia fighters have seemingly kept the Taliban out of the city over the past two weeks. Intensive fighting continues south of Herat for control of the highway that connects the city to its airport ([TOLO News](#), July 30).

The recent battlefield success of the Taliban has pulled many of Afghanistan's old warlords back onto the frontlines, including Ismael Khan, who began fighting in the 1980s. These militia leaders do not control the large amounts of forces that they did during the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s, but they maintain a grip on large private fortunes and political networks from which they can recruit fighters.

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### Notes

[1] HRW report, 2002: <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/afghan3/herat1002-03.htm>

## From “Jihad of Open Fronts” to Lone Wolf Attacks—The Enduring Legacy of al-Qaeda’s Abu Musab al-Suri

*Halla Diyab*

The latest issue of al-Qaeda’s *Inspire Magazine* prominently featured a call for ‘lone wolf’ style attacks on Americans. This is the first time that al-Qaeda made a call for lone wolf-style jihadists to conduct attacks in the United States since 2017. The article praised attackers such as Ahmad al-Issa, a Syrian American who is accused of killing ten people this past month in a Colorado grocery store. A separate al-Qaeda linked organization, al-Hikmah Media Foundation, separately published advice to potential lone wolf attackers on August 3 ([SITE](#), July 28; [SITE](#) August 3).

As Western nations continue to face a threat from lone wolf violence, it is important to understand the ideological theoretician who wrote on and argued for these types of attacks as a senior member of al-Qaeda. Mustafa bin`Abd al-Qadir Setmariam Nasar (a.k.a. Abu Musab al-Suri) was a major ideological contributor to al-Qaeda whose work is still regularly used and cited by today’s extremists. His role as an ideological theoretician helped define modern jihadism. Beginning his career in the inner circle of Osama bin Laden, he became a leading jihadist strategist on the world stage.

### Background

Al-Suri was born on October 26, 1958, in Aleppo, Syria. He began his insurgent career at a young age in Syria, when he joined the Combatant Vanguard organization, a radical offshoot of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood founded by Marwan Hadid. The group led an Islamist uprising against the al-Baath Party—the

ruling political party in Syria, which was then headed by Hafez al-Assad. The uprising lasted from 1976 to 1982. Al-Suri fled Syria in the 1980s as the uprising began to fail, joining other Muslim Brotherhood members in exile. During this time, he reportedly trained in military camps overseen by the organization and located in Iraq and Jordan. Al-Suri was then appointed as an officer in the High Military Command under the leadership of Sa'ïd Hawwa. He acted as the position of deputy chief of North West Syria during the uprising in Hama against al-Assad in 1982 ([Islamist Movements](#), October 26, 2019). Al-Suri left the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood following the failure of the uprising. Specifically, he objected to the "National Alliance" that was formed between the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Communist parties and the Baath Party in Iraq.

He emigrated to France and later, in the mid-1980s, to Spain. He married a Spanish woman, Elena Moreno, and became a Spanish citizen. In 1987, al-Suri and a few of his friends left Spain for Peshawar to join the jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviet occupation. In Afghanistan, al-Suri met Abdullah Azzam, the founder of the Afghan Arab mujahideen movement in Afghanistan. It is reported that al-Suri was a military trainer for the insurgency ([eipss-eg.org](#), September 26, 2019).

### **Affiliation with Osama bin Laden**

Al-Suri met Osama bin Laden while in Peshawar and was reportedly a member of his inner circle. He worked for bin Laden as a public relations representative and media organizer until 1992. His involvement in media began when he moved to London in 1994, where he established a media company, the Islamic Conflict Studies Bureau, together with Mohamed Bahaiah. Through his company, he facilitated media content for mainstream Western media organizations, including Peter Bergen's famous CNN interview

with bin Laden in March 1997 ([aawsat.com](#), January 6, 2012). Before 9/11, al-Suri acted as the media facilitator for al-Qaeda, accompanying Western reporters including Robert Fisk and Abdulla Atwan, on their meetings with Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan ([beirutme.com](#), April 8, 2016). With his language skills, al-Suri assisted in providing global visibility to the group, which was able to draw attention to itself and attract followers to its cause. Al-Suri's military background in Syria, Iraq and Jordan, and his Western outreach in the UK and Spain, made him an effective envoy for the jihadist movement.

Following bin Laden's declaration of war on the United States in 1996, al-Suri moved to Afghanistan in 1997 and proclaimed his allegiance to Mullah Omar, the then-leader of the Taliban. The move shifted al-Suri's role from media support for bin Laden to more of an operational military position in the group's training camps. He also organized a media and research center in Afghanistan's capital Kabul. In 2000, he opened his own training camp, the al-Ghuraba Camp, which was overseen by the Taliban's Ministry of Defense ([aljumhuriya.net](#), November 13, 2013).

### **Criticizing al-Qaeda**

In 1998, al-Suri wrote a seven-page report, criticizing the contemptuous attitude al-Qaeda members had shown toward the Taliban leadership, including Mullah Omar. Al-Suri would go on to also criticize al-Qaeda's strategic decisions, including the 1998 U.S. Embassies bombing in Kenya and Tanzania and the 9/11 attacks, arguing that they were catastrophic for al-Qaeda ([arabi21.com](#), May 7, 2015). Al-Suri, however, would become more supportive of terrorist tactics by 2003, when he began endorsing attacks in the West, including the 7/7 London bombings. An audio recording of al-Suri features him justifying the attack by quoting Quranic verses and hadith, which are the

collective sayings of the Prophet Muhammad ([Vidéo Dailymotion](#), 2012).

### **The Evolutionary Path**

Despite lacking religious credentials, al-Suri is a noted ideological theoretician. Under his pen name “Umar Abd al-Hakim,” he published several books, including the 900-page *The Islamic Jihadi Revolution in Syria*. Released in 1991, the book criticized Salafism’s insistence on ideological purity. Al-Suri instead emphasized the importance of attaining desirable political outcomes, rather than following doctrinal purity ([eipss-eg.org](#), September 26, 2019). Al-Suri also wrote that the use of violence should be based on an ideological long-term strategy. He stated in his book, *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, that jihad is a staged process that goes through three stages—Islamic and religious passion, the will to fight, and jihadist ideology.

### **The Pioneer of the Lone-Wolf Phenomenon**

Al-Suri’s 1,600-page book, *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, was released in 2004 and called for a “jihad of open fronts,” which was an early euphemism for lone wolf-style attacks ([shrc.com](#), May 25, 2017). Al-Suri states that “one can perform solo jihad in any part of the Arab and Muslim world, indeed in the whole world, because this is not tied to certain objective conditions, then the jihad of open fronts needs certain strategic conditions necessary to provide the circumstances of success Allah willing.” [2]

Al-Suri was able overcome his lack of religious education, as his writings have shaped organizations like al-Qaeda and Islamic State. Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has complemented al-Suri’s writings ([rosaelyoussef.com](#), August 12, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

Al-Suri was captured in the Pakistani city of Quetta in 2005 and then was extradited to

Syria. His current status is unknown, as it has been reported that Bashar al-Assad of Syria released him in 2011, but al-Qaeda claims that al-Suri is still in prison. Despite his unknown location, al-Suri is one of the foremost strategists who shaped and defined today’s global jihadist movements ([alarab.co.uk](#), August 3, 2018).

Al-Suri was a jihadist fighter who turned into a theoretician and helped define the global jihadist movement. This evolution has made al-Suri one of the foremost strategists of al-Qaeda, and his literary and strategic legacy is a testament to the continuity and the survival of the jihadist movement.

Al-Suri’s writings remain significant due to its cross-generational appeal. Unlike many other jihadist ideologues, al-Suri succeeded in influencing the modern jihadist movements in two ways—he justified brutal methods in carrying out jihadism; and secondly, his writings advised how to organize Islamist militant groups. Al-Suri’s book *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance* has become a manual for many of the strategies and tactics used by al-Qaeda—and also Islamic State—including the encouragement of lone wolf attackers. Al-Suri’s books and writings provided a framework for jihadist militant groups, around which many groups, including al-Qaeda and Islamic State offshoots around the world, continue to organize around.

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### **Notes**

[1] [The Call to Global Islamic Resistance](#), page 38.

[2] Ibid.

## Mufti Amir Hamza Fuels Bangladeshi Extremism Through ‘Wa’z Mehfls’

*Animesh Roul*

### Introduction

On May 5, Bangladeshi police arrested Mohammad Shakib and Ali Hasan Osama, two members of the al-Qaeda-linked Ansar al-Islam terrorist group. They were arrested for “planning and instigating” an attack on the National Parliament (also called the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban) in the capital Dhaka. Shakib was arrested with a sword and black flag near the parliament while Ali Hasan Osama was apprehended in the Rajbari area of Dhaka ([BDNews24.com](http://BDNews24.com), May 6).

According to police, Shakib drew inspiration from the incendiary sermons of Mufti Amir Hamza, Ali Hasan Osama, Mahmudul Hasan Gunobi, and Harun Izhar posted on popular social media sites such as YouTube and Facebook. Extremist messaging on those platforms were also listed as a key part of Shakib’s radicalization. Shakib’s interrogation led to the arrests of several pro-al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Islam elements that include sympathizers, extremist ideologues and Islamist orators who have inspired and radicalized youths like him to embrace “militancy and martyrdom.” Shakib’s confessions led to the arrests of radical Islamist orators Amir Hamza from Dabiravita village of Kushtia on May 24 and Maulana Hasan Gunobi from Dhaka’s Shah Ali Beribandh on July 15 ([New Age](http://NewAge.com), May 24; [Daily Star](http://DailyStar.com), July 17).

### Hamza and Wa’z Mehfls Under Watch

In Bangladesh, Wa’z Mehfls, or Islamic sermon gatherings, are important platforms for socio-religious conversation. Islamic scholars are supposed to address public gatherings to spread the virtues of Islam, and so are primarily organized in impoverished rural settings. However, the foiled parliament attack plot brought Bangladesh’s unique Wa’z Mehfl culture under scrutiny.

In January, the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) branch of the Bangladeshi police noted that the popular Wa’z Mehfls are turning into radical congregations that are fanning sectarian, anti-state and pro-Islamist rule. The gatherings frequently deploy fictional rhetoric and satire against modern or progressive values. Police also observed that Islamist clerics and speakers used the platform to promote their ideological agenda. Speakers are inciting social unrest and violence by delivering aggressive speeches against the government, various state institutions, minority communities and women. These misleading speeches—which lack textual references to the holy Quran or the hadith (the collected sayings of the Prophet Muhammad)—are disseminated through social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook ([Daily Star](http://DailyStar.com), January 20).

According to the police, Hamza and Gunobi—both being hugely popular Islamist preachers with extremist worldviews—propagate provocative religious and anti-state statements to the general public. However, unlike Gunobi, who is directly involved in pro-al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Islam activities and is known for incendiary speeches at Rohingya refugee camps, Amir Hamza has associated himself with the pro-

caliphate Islamist group Hefajat-e-Islam. He is a famous personality among Islamist propagandists, with a robust presence on the ground and in popular social media channels.

After his arrest, Hamza denied his direct involvement in the National Parliament attack plot. However, he confessed to misinterpreting Islam and spreading extremism through the Wa'z Mehfls. His provocative anti-state and sectarian speeches on social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook have inspired many youths to join the al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansar al-Islam and other extremist groups in Bangladesh ([BDNews24](#), May 31). Hamza has often criticized Bangladesh's secular values and anti-Islamic sentiments in recorded speeches published online and has highlighted the alleged high-handedness of law enforcement toward the Islamist scholar community in the country ([YouTube](#), November 11, 2020). Following his confession, the Dhaka judiciary sent Hamza to the Dhaka Central Jail in Keraniganj ([Dhaka Tribune](#), May 31).

### **Who is Amir Hamza?**

Amir Hamza is the joint-general secretary of the Jatiya Mufassir Parishad (National Council of Commentators), a national-level organization comprised of eminent Islamic scholars with knowledge of and expertise to interpret the Quran and hadith ([Bangla Tribune](#), June 21). JMP was in the news in early November 2020, when the members of Chittagong branch held a public rally to protest the display of Muhammed's cartoons in France. The organization demanded France to offer an unconditional apology to the Muslim communities ([Daily Purbo Desh](#) [Benglai], November 9, 2020).

Born in the town of Patikabari in the Kushtia district and son of Muhammed Riazuddin, Amir Hamza received his education from the Hafizia Islamic seminary. Subsequently, he completed his education in Islamic jurisprudence to become a mufti for the Qawmi Madrasa in Khustia ([InfoBD.org](#), May 6). Later, he went to the Islamic University Kushtia for a Masters in Quranic Studies. His knowledge of the Quran and hadith, and skills in reciting and interpreting them, made him one of the most popular Islamic commentators in contemporary Bangladesh. His expertise in connecting verses from the Quran and hadith to social and political issues made an influential religious speaker in Bangladesh and the Bengali-speaking region of neighboring India.

Due to his spirited lectures, often laced with humor and satire toward the government and secular sections of the country, Amir Hamza often comes under intense scrutiny from security agencies. He lyrically used verses of the Quran and hadith in his speeches to strike an emotional chord with his audiences at Wa'z gatherings. Hamza is often compared to Zakir Naik of Bangladesh, an influential Indian-born fugitive Islamist televangelist and preacher known for his vitriolic attacks against non-Muslims and support for jihadist elements.

Amir Hamza's name is also associated with another fugitive Islamist speaker, Maulana Mizanur Rahman Azhari, who left for Malaysia in early 2020 after being accused of using Wa'z gatherings for religious conversions and anti-state hate speeches ([Weekly Blitz](#), April 29; [BBC Bengali](#), February 8). Closely linked with Mizanur Rahman Azhari, Hamza used similar tactics to influence the unsuspecting audience

with imaginary narratives spoken in Arabic and the local Bengali language.

Hamza was also accused of misleading people during the height of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. He reportedly urged his followers on social media not to follow preventative measures, citing the Quran and hadith. He discouraged his followers from wearing masks and assured them that the coronavirus only affects non-believers and those who don't pray five times a day. He said in one message: "I swear Corona will not come to you. If it comes, then the Qur'an will be a lie. Will Allah disprove his Qur'an?" ([PurpoPaschim Bangladesh](#), May 24; [Jugantor](#) [Bengali], May 25).

### **Extremist Linkages**

Bangladeshi police sources believe Islamist preachers like Amir Hamza have communicated with Tamim al-Adnani, the Ansar al-Islam spiritual leader al-Imran and fugitive al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS-Bangladesh) leader. Al-Adnani has mentioned the arrest of these Islamist scholars on his social media channels, which were released and circulated on the Umma Network YouTube channel. In numerous video clips, al-Adnani criticized the arrests of these Muslim scholars and accused Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of anti-Muslim activities. Al-Adnani asserted the arrests were done in collusion with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi ([Weekly Blitz](#), May 10; [YouTube](#), May 6). Messages from al-Adnani suggest that Islamists like Hamza receive moral support from online extremists, as the transnational jihadist group favors extremist intellectuals, propelling them to engage in deliberations and confrontations with what they believe to be anti-Islamic activities.

Evidence that the pro-caliphate Islamist group Hefazat-e-Islam (HeI) controls some Wa'z Mehfil gatherings and that Islamist scholars participate in such gatherings across Bangladesh came to light in April. The arrest of several HeI leaders and activists, including Ahmed Abdul Quader, for his involvement in riots that raged across the country in March, exposed a deadly nexus of Islamist scholars and militant groups ([BD News24](#), April 25). The riots resulted in a countrywide crackdown on HeI leaders and activists. Amir Hamza went into hiding during the mass arrests that followed the violence, which coincided with a visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Dhaka and the desecration of a statue of Bangladeshi founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Amir Hamza's name surfaced during that time, and his ultimate arrest brought to light his association with HeI.

### **Conclusion**

While now in jail, Mufti Amir Hamza and his sermons are still available on social media channels and Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies are looking for direct or indirect links with Ansar al-Islam Bangladesh and al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). Amir Hamza's extremist commentary may still stoke violence in the country, as they will undoubtedly inspire vulnerable youths, like the National Parliament attack plotters, to support extremism.

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## Will This Chechen Warlord be Forced out of Idlib? A Profile of Muslim Abu Walid al-Shishani

*Valery Dzutsati*

In June, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Organization for the Liberation of the Levant, or HTS) demanded that the Chechen warlord Muslim Shishani join their organization or leave Idlib, Syria. Reports of the demand emerged on June 27. A local news agency in its reporting referred to Muslim Shishani as a “well-known and respected long-time mujahid commander” ([YouTube](#), June 27).

HTS reportedly asked Muslim Shishani and the militant group he commands, Junud al-Sham (Soldiers of the Levant), to join its ranks and submit to its policies or leave its area of control and move to the territories held by the Free Syrian Army factions that are more closely aligned with Turkey. Currently, Junud al-Sham (a.k.a. Jund al-Sham, not to be confused with the original Jund al-Sham founded in 1991 in Jordan) has outposts in the Latakia countryside, west of Idlib province. The group has operated in Syria for eight years and has been among the longest-surviving militant organizations in the country.

Muslim Shishani allegedly rejected HTS' demands. The militant commander issued an indignant, but diplomatic public statement about being singled out by HTS for unknown reasons. Shishani asked HTS to allow his faction to continue fighting Syrian government forces. In return, the Chechen commander promised not to interfere in the social and political affairs of Idlib, which is under the control of HTS. Observers doubt that Muslim Shishani and his group will leave the province. According to an anonymous source in HTS' leadership, Junud al-

Sham only has about 60 members and its importance has been exaggerated. HTS leaders believe that the group has criminals within its ranks who have tried to escape prosecution. At the same time, HTS denies that it opposes other groups fighting the Syrian regime ([al-Monitor](#) July 2; [Chechensinsyria.com](#) July 2).

HTS itself has a highly problematic reputation. In May 2018, the U.S. State Department labeled the group a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), in line with the designation placed on its predecessor organization, the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. In 2016 and 2017, Jabhat al-Nusra signaled that it was breaking ties with al-Qaeda, changing its name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and then eventually aligning with several smaller organizations to form HTS ([Al Jazeera](#), July 29, 2016). The U.S. government has kept HTS on the list of terrorist organizations despite the latter's rebranding efforts. Regional analysts say that the U.S. wants to see HTS disbanded. In 2020, the U.S. Department of State's Reward for Justice Program upped the reward for information on the leader of the organization Abu Mohammed al-Jolani to \$10 million ([al-Monitor](#), December 21, 2020).

According to some sources, Turkey is putting pressure on HTS to eradicate the other jihadist groups in Idlib. Ankara reportedly wants to appease Moscow and present HTS as a moderate organization that both countries can deal with in the rebel-held province. Given the vehemence with which Russia has cracked down on Chechen fighters at home and abroad, it is plausible that Russian security services have engaged in negotiations to target, disperse and eradicate any militant groups containing Chechens, such as Muslim Shishani's Junud al-Sham. Turkey and Russia are engaged in complex negotiations to reach a settlement on Idlib. Removing Chechen groups from the political scene might be part of such a settlement ([al-Monitor](#), July 2; [al-Monitor](#), June 26, 2020).

## Who is Muslim Shishani?

Muslim Shishani (a.k.a. Muslim Abu Walid al-Shishani) is the *nom de guerre* of Murad Iraklievich Margoshvili, who comes from the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia. The U.S. designated Shishani as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) in 2014. The State Department regarded him as “a well-known Chechen leader in Syria who built a terrorist training base in Syria near the Turkish border, where newly arrived foreign fighters received combat training.” The agency pointed out that Shishani was the leader of Junud al-Sham, “a militant group that fights alongside other extremist groups in Syria.” The State Department also designated a group called Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (Army of Emigrants and Supporters) as a terrorist organization at the same time as Shishani. That militant organization was also dominated by Chechens ([State.gov](#), September 24, 2014).

At the time of Shishani’s SDGT designation, the most prominent Chechen militant in Iraq and Syria was Tarkhan Batirashvili (a.k.a. Abu Omar al-Shishani). Like Muslim Shishani, Batirashvili was also from the Pankisi area in Georgia and a veteran of the 2008 Russian-Georgian War. He became a jihadist after being discharged from the Georgian military for health reasons. He led the militant group Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar before joining Islamic State (IS). Batirashvili rapidly progressed to senior commanding positions in the extremist organization ([Kavkaz-Center](#), July 2, 2014). He was killed in a U.S. airstrike in 2016 ([Kavkazsky Uzel](#), July 20, 2018).

Muslim Shishani, 49, was born Murad Margoshvili in Duisi Pankisi, Georgia (other sources claim he was born in Grozny, Chechnya). Pankisi is adjacent to Chechnya and primarily populated by ethnic Chechens also known in Georgia as Kists – a Chechen subgroup. The Pankisi area lies on the southern slopes of the Caucasus mountains and is part of Georgia,

unlike Chechnya proper, which is situated on the northern slopes of the mountains and is part of Russia. During the Russian-Chechen wars of 1994-1996 and 1999-2001, Pankisi experienced large influxes of Chechen refugees, which caused further disruption to an already impoverished region.

According to Russian sources, as part of his compulsory military conscript service, Shishani served in a Soviet air defense unit in Mongolia. In 1995, he joined a group fighting the invasion of Russian forces into the separatist Republic of Ichkeria – modern day Chechnya. Reportedly, he was acquainted with the Chechen warlord Shamil Basaev, Yemeni militant Abu Jafar and Saudi Arabian militant Abu al-Walid (hence, Shishani’s later nickname Muslim Abu Walid al-Shishani, after the original Abu al-Walid was killed in Tsa-Vedeno in Chechnya in 2004). Shishani quickly rose to the rank of the emir of Vedeno. In 2002, Abu Walid reportedly sent him to organize a new front in the Sunzha raion, or district, located on the border between Chechnya and Ingushetia.

In October 2003, Shishani was arrested by Russian security forces and spent two and a half years in prison. In 2004, the militant was convicted of being a member of an illegal armed group. In 2006, the Supreme Court of the Russian region of Ingushetia (next door to Chechnya) exonerated and released him from detention. After his release, Shishani returned to Georgia for medical treatment. Once there, he helped groups of militants cross from Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge to Chechnya, according to Russian sources. Some alleged that he cooperated with Georgian security services ([Rusvesna](#), January 14, 2016). Shishani likely agreed to be recruited by Russian intelligence services while he was in prison in exchange for an early release. The recruitment seemed to have failed, as the Chechen militant formed an extremist group and in 2012 moved to Syria to

fight Bashar al-Assad's regime. A Chechen fighter's relocation to the Middle East was not surprising given the presence of Arab jihadist fighters in Chechnya during the Russian-Chechen wars and the interwar period (see [TM](#), January 31, 2006).

### **Operating in Syria**

By 2016, Shishani's group was said to be in severe decline. Junud al-Sham's membership was reduced to a handful of individuals. In a Russian-language interview in 2018, Shishani asked fellow Muslims for financial help and called for new recruits. The field commander tried to strike a conciliatory note with rival factions, but in doing so exposed information on multiple ongoing conflicts between jihadist groups in the Middle East. Shishani attributed the lack of support for his organization to the confusion that many Muslims have about joining the "right" militant group. Shishani chided Islamist leaders who provided confusing advice on the correct direction of jihad. He himself offered little guidance, but assured his audience that many capable people are willing to join the jihadist cause and fight in the "right" way ([OGN](#), October 25, 2018).

Shishani does not lack conflicts with fellow jihadists, including among his compatriot Georgians. According to sources in Georgia, Tsezar Tokhosashvili (a.k.a. al-Bara Shishani) came from the village of Omalo in Pankisi and was part of Margoshvili's group before 2015, when he joined Islamic State. A disagreement between the two militant leaders resulted in a shootout. Tokhosashvili received serious injuries in the incident and had to go to a hospital in Turkey for treatment. Later, Tokhosashvili returned to Syria to form his own group of militants, but joined Islamic State instead, allegedly due to a lack of funding. Al-Bara Shishani served as a deputy to another Chechen, Abu Omar al-Shishani (a.k.a. Tarkhan

Batirashvili), the man the U.S. Defense Department described as Islamic State's "minister of war." When the latter was killed in a 2016 airstrike, Tokhosashvili reportedly fled from Iraq to Turkey. In 2019, he was arrested in Ukraine ([Novaya Gazeta](#), November 22, 2019; [ZN.ua](#), May 18, 2020).

Since Muslim Shishani's group Junud al-Sham has operated in Syria for such an extended period of time—eight years—it is the "default" militant group for new recruits from the Caucasus to join. Many militants from the North and South Caucasus have seemingly spent at least some time in the ranks of Junud al-Sham. For example, when the leader of the Caucasus Emirate in the Middle East (not to be confused with the original Caucasus Emirate founded by Doku Umarov in 2007 in the North Caucasus) was killed in Syria in May 2020, his suspected killers were identified as militants who had previously been part of Junud al-Sham ([Kavkazsky Uzel](#), May 19, 2020).

### **Fights Against Islamic State after being Declared Dead**

As frequently happens with militants, the media has erroneously reported Shishani's death. In 2018, Iraqi media reported that government forces had killed Muslim Abu Walid al-Shishani in the area of Kirkuk in northern Iraq. Russian media mistakenly or purposely called him "the advisor and the right hand" of then Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ([Sputnik](#), April 9, 2018).

Meanwhile, Shishani has repeatedly criticized Islamic State and the two groups have fought each other ([aymennjawad.org](#), September 8, 2019). The inter-Chechen rift between those who support IS and those who are against the group, such as Shishani, goes back several years ([rferl.org](#), January 28, 2015). Shishani also denied information about his group's

involvement in Turkish operations against Kurdish forces, which some Turkish-language media had touted ([Eadaily.com](http://Eadaily.com), January 28, 2018).

## Conclusion

Muslim Shishani and his group's long survival in Syria indicates that he is a reasonably skilled diplomat who has managed to navigate between competing factions and avoid being caught in the crossfire. The latest conflict between HTS and Shishani illustrates the high stakes involved in HTS' efforts to normalize itself in the eyes of the world by picking conflicts with extremist groups like Junud al-Sham. Though Shishani appears to possess substantial diplomatic abilities and has managed to survive for years while operating in the turbulent Syrian civil war, the non-Arab fighters will still likely be pushed out and replaced by local groups and commanders. The decline of IS and other non-state actors curbed the inflow of fresh recruits from the Caucasus, which will reinforce this trend. The remaining Chechens and Caucasians will likely either seek refuge outside the Middle East or try to blend into their local environs as much as they are able to.

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## Why are Indian Security Officials Talking to Taliban Leader Khairullah Khairkhwa?

*Sudha Ramachandran*

With the exit of U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan and the Taliban seizing ever greater amounts of territory, Indian officials have reportedly begun talking to Taliban leaders ([Times of India](http://Times of India), June 23). Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Khairullah Khairkhwa and Shaikh Dilawar are among the Taliban leaders that are reported to be in talks with India, according to the Taliban ([Twitter.com/Samiyousafzai](https://twitter.com/Samiyousafzai), June 29). Baradar, who is the head of the Taliban's Doha political office, led the group's negotiations with the United States that culminated in the February 2020 agreement on U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Baradar is a key Taliban negotiator in the talks with the Afghan government (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), March 4). Like Baradar, Khairkhwa is part of the Doha political office and a member of the Taliban negotiating team. He spent 12 years in the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay. So why is India talking to a former Guantanamo detainee?

### The Pre-Guantanamo Years

Born in 1963 in the Arghistan district of Kandahar province, Khairullah Khairkhwa received a religious education at the Haqqaniya and Akora Khattak madrassas in Pakistan. He participated in the Afghan jihad of the 1980s against the Soviets as part of the Harakat-e Enqelab-e Islami organization ([Afghanistan Analysts Network](#) [AAN], June 21, 2013).

A close associate of Taliban chief Mullah Omar, Khairkhwa was a co-founder of the Taliban. According to a biographical profile of him on

the Taliban website, he was the group's spokesperson from 1994 to 1996, in the initial years of its existence before the group came to power. During the Taliban regime, Khairkhwa served as its interior minister, commander for the southwestern region, and finally, governor of the western province of Herat ([Voice of Jihad](#), September 30, 2020).

Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the fall of the Taliban regime, several Taliban leaders were reportedly keen to surrender. Khairkhwa was among them. He reportedly got in touch with Hamid Karzai, an old family friend – both are Pashtuns of the Popalzai tribe – to negotiate his surrender, personal safety and a position in the new government ([AAN](#), June 4, 2014). Karzai had reportedly promised to help him, but before that could materialize, a rival in the Taliban alerted Pakistani authorities of his location, according to an Afghan security official. [1] Khairkhwa was taken into custody by Pakistani authorities in February 2002. He was then handed over to the Americans and eventually shifted to the Guantanamo facility ([AAN](#), June 4, 2014). According to the Afghan official, Khairkhwa “has not forgotten or forgiven the Pakistanis” to date for having “betrayed him and handed him” over to the Americans. [2]

### **A Taliban ‘Hardliner’?**

A United Nations-sanctioned militant, Khairkhwa was the highest-ranking Taliban leader held at the Guantanamo facility. According to the U.S. government file from his time at Guantanamo, the Pakistani Military Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate saw him as “a hardliner in his support of the Taliban philosophy.” In their assessment of Khairkhwa, U.S. officials at Guantanamo noted that he was “extremely intelligent” and had more “detailed knowledge about the inner workings of the Taliban than any other [Taliban] detainee” at Guantanamo. He was “directly associated” with

al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and the Taliban's founder-chief Mullah Muhammad Omar, was “probably associated with a militant training camp in Herat” run by al-Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and “probably used his position and influences [as Herat's governor]” to become a “major opium drug lord” and “probably used profits from drugs to promote Taliban interests in the area.” Following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, Khairkhwa is said to have engaged in talks with Iranian officials, seeking their help in hostilities against the U.S. and NATO forces. These were cited by Guantanamo officials as the reasons for his continued detention in the facility. Guantanamo officials assessed him to be “HIGH risk, as he may pose a threat to the US, its interests and allies; A LOW threat from a detention perspective [and] of HIGH intelligence value” (emphasis in original). ([Wikileaks](#), March 6, 2008).

### **Or a Taliban Moderate?**

Journalists and analysts who interacted with Khairullah when he was governor of Herat disagree with his depiction by U.S. and Pakistani security officials as a ‘hardliner.’ They have pointed out that many of the allegations made against him in the Guantanamo files were incorrect and lacking in evidence. He was reportedly regarded as “one of the more moderate Taleban in leadership circles,” a person, who unlike other Taliban leaders, “was comfortable speaking to a foreigner and, very unusually, happy to be interviewed in Persian (most Taleban would only speak Pashto at the time). “ The situation in Herat when he was governor “was noticeably more relaxed than Kabul, Mazar or Kandahar,” as well ([AAN](#), June 21, 2013).

Under Khairkhwa's governorship, Herat enjoyed more openness than other provincial capitals in Afghanistan; residents were openly critical of the government. He was “friendly,” “made an extra

effort” to engage those who didn’t support the Taliban and did not force his views on others ([Los Angeles Times](#), June 6, 2014). These observations indicate that Khairkhwa was more inclusive and less intolerant or rigid than other Taliban leaders.

During Khairkhwa’s incarceration at Guantanamo, several appeals for his release emerged, including from the then-Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Afghanistan’s High Peace Council, an Afghan government body tasked with reconciliation with the Taliban ([al-Jazeera](#), March 19, 2011; [Pajhwok](#), June 2, 2014). Khairkhwa was among five Taliban leaders – the other four were Norullah Noori, Mohammed Fazl, Abdul Haq Wasiq and Mohammad Nabi Omari – detained at Guantanamo, whose release was considered important for the setting up of a Taliban political office and the start of talks with the insurgent group ([al-Jazeera](#), March 19, 2011). Finally, on June 1, 2014, the ‘Taliban Five,’ as they became known, were released from the Guantanamo prison in exchange for U.S. Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl. Khairkhwa had spent 12 years in the Guantanamo military prison with no charges brought against him.

### **Post-Guantanamo**

Since his release from Guantanamo, Khairkhwa has been based in Doha with his family ([Pajhwok](#), September 10, 2020). In 2018, amid growing American diplomatic efforts to reach a political settlement on the Afghan conflict, including the appointment of Zalmay Khalilzad as the U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan reconciliation, the Taliban appointed Khairkhwa and the rest of the Taliban Five as members of its Doha political office ([Al Jazeera](#), October 31, 2018). Subsequently, he represented the Taliban in negotiations with U.S. officials and representatives of the Afghan government.

If his interviews to the media are any indication of his views, then post-Guantanamo Khairkhwa remains a moderate in the Taliban, at least in his approach. “Taking power by force,” he said in an interview in 2020, “will never end the conflicts in Afghanistan.” He also acknowledged in the interview that Afghanistan today is not the country the Taliban ruled back in the late 1990s. “We are sure that people now, are not the same people from 20 years ago,” he said, drawing attention to “drastic changes” in Afghan society ([al-Jazeera](#), July 11, 2020). This suggests that Khairkhwa is more realistic in his outlook and perhaps recognizes the need for the Taliban to adjust its approach and policies to the changed situation in the country.

But Khairkhwa’s commitment to Islamic law in Afghanistan remains strong. “I started ‘jihad’ to remove foreign forces from my country and establish an Islamic government, and jihad will continue until we reach that goal through a political agreement,” the Taliban leader said ([al-Jazeera](#), March 19). And although he has expressed support for “women’s rights, education and full freedom” it will have to be “within Islam and Islamic law,” and “within the circle of Islam” ([al-Jazeera](#), July 11, 2020).

### **Stature in Taliban**

Khairkhwa’s inclusion in the Taliban negotiating team was important as he is an influential leader in the organization. A Guantanamo veteran, his appointment to the negotiation team was seen to be necessary in order to bring on board Taliban hardliners, especially the younger fighters, the Afghan official said. [3]

According to terrorism analyst Abdul Basit, Khairkhwa is a respected figure in the Taliban as he was a close associate of Mullah Omar and a co-founder of the group. For the Taliban, “it is a matter of pride” to field leaders like Khairkhwa in the negotiations. For one, his presence in the Taliban’s negotiating teams sends out a message

of continuity with change, that “while the Taliban political and social outlook may have evolved, the principles and fundamentals of the ideology haven’t changed.” Besides, by fielding former Guantanamo detainees in the “talks with his captors [the U.S.],” the Taliban was “telling the Americans that they had lost the war.” [4] Inclusion of Guantanamo detainees in the negotiating team was a way for the Taliban to mock the United States.

As Afghanistan hurtles toward a civil war, the moderate Khairkhwa “could have a calming effect on the Taliban,” Basit says. [5] The Afghan official disagrees. Khairkhwa “was useful to get negotiations off the ground.” However, with the escalation of the Taliban’s military offensives, “that phase is now over.” “Moderates like Baradar and Khairkhwa are sidelined,” the Afghan official said, pointing out that the Taliban hawks are now ascendant. [6]

## Conclusion

Khairkhwa and Baradar are said to be close. Both hail from the Popalzai tribe, were part of Mullah Omar’s inner circle and are co-founders of the Taliban. The two also share a “deep suspicion of Pakistan,” according to the Afghan official. Both have not forgotten that it was Pakistani ‘betrayal’ that led to their long confinements, Khairkhwa in Guantanamo and Baradar’s eight-year-long imprisonment in a Pakistani prison. [7]

Unlike the members of the Quetta *shura* (leadership council), who are based on Pakistani soil, leaders like Baradar and Khairkhwa are not dependent on Pakistani sanctuary, as they are based in Doha. Not beholden to Islamabad for their safety or survival, they are therefore not as susceptible to Pakistani influence or pressure as the Quetta-based Taliban leaders. That Baradar and Khairkhwa are more moderate and importantly, less likely to take orders from

Pakistan, has made them relatively more acceptable to India.

## Notes

[1] Author’s Interview, Afghan security official based in Kabul, August 2.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Author’s Interview, Abdul Basit, associate research fellow at the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, July 28.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Afghan official.

[7] Ibid.

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