



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

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Ayemen al-Zawahiri Confirms Death of Sahelian Jihadist Mastermind Mokhtar Belmokhtar

Jacob Zenn

Mokhtar Belmokhtar became a "legend" in jihadism in the Sahel for masterminding numerous terrorist attacks, including the hostage-taking operation at In Amenas gas plant in Algeria in 2013. However, it had been unknown whether or not Belmokhtar was active since 2015. In September 2021, Ayemen al-Zawahiri finally confirmed that Belmokhtar has, in fact, become a "martyr" (ndtv.com, September 12).

An Algerian Afghan jihad veteran, Belmokhtar had been facing charges in the U.S. in absentia for his role in the In Amenas attack and his broader "reign of terror" that was in furtherance of his self-proclaimed goal of waging bloody jihad against the West" (fbi.gov, July 19, 2013). Belmokhtar also mastermind the bombings at French-run mining facilities in Arlit and Agadez, Niger (France24, May 24, 2013). His broader contribution to jihadism in his career was extending al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) influence in the Sahel and even as far as Nigeria, where he was sent messages from Boko Haram when

the group sought, and subsequently received, AQIM support to launch its jihad in 2010 (al-Andalus, January 2017).

Belmokhtar remained steadfastly loyal to al-Qaeda throughout his career and even looked down on AQIM's own leadership, which lacked the Afghan jihad experience that Belmokhtar himself had acquired in the late 1980s ([Associated Press \[Al-Qaeda Papers\]](http://Associated Press [Al-Qaeda Papers]), February 14, 2013). This attitude and Belmokhtar's unwillingness to follow AQIM orders resulted in Belmokhtar's forming various Sahelian jihadist groups aligned with, but separate from, AQIM, including Katibat al-Mulathamun, Katibat Muwaqiu Bidima, and al-Murabitun. All remained loyal to al-Qaeda, despite not being recognized as affiliates to the same extent as AQIM.

In May 2015, Belmokhtar was involved in factional turmoil when al-Murabitun split. Belmokhtar allegedly announced a new "al-Qaeda in West Africa" group that turned out to be based on a phony statement not actually from him, while his former al-Murabitun co-leader, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, formed Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) (Twitter.com/@TRACterrorism, August 13, 2015). Belmokhtar was not seen or heard

of, thereafter, and was reportedly killed in a U.S. drone strike in Ajdabiya, Libya in June 2015 (france24.com, June 15, 2015). However, such reports were unconfirmed, no corpse was displayed, and no statement on Belmokhtar's death was released by his co-fighters. The mystery of Belmokhtar's whereabouts persisted.

In October 2015, an al-Qaeda spokesman, Hussam Abdul Raouf, mentioned Belmokhtar among the names of other al-Qaeda leaders who had been "martyred" ([Twitter.com/@menastream](https://twitter.com/@menastream), October 6, 2015). This statement, however, did not have a particularly widespread audience nor did it come from the highest levels of al-Qaeda or AQIM leadership. As a result, the mystery of Belmokhtar's status persisted further. The next, and certainly more authoritative, acknowledgement of Belmokhtar's death has arrived with Aymen al-Zawahiri's mention of Belmokhtar among al-Qaeda "martyrs" in September 2021, including three s from AQIM: Abu al-Hassan al-Bulaydi, Abu Iyad al-Tunisi, and Abu Musab Abdul Wadud (Abu Malek Droukdel) (ndtv.com, September 12).

In neither Hussam Abdul Raouf's nor al-Zawahiri's cases were Belmokhtar's death explained or prominently highlighted. However, now that both of them have indicated that Belmokhtar is dead, and because Belmokhtar still has not surfaced since 2015, it is safe to confirm his death for the first time. The lack of any other specific praise for Belmokhtar's contributions to jihadism from jihadists, despite the various attacks that he orchestrated, likely stems from Belmokhtar's controversial career. Al-Zawahiri, after all, blessed AQIM's becoming an affiliate in 2007 while al-Zawahiri was still Usama bin Laden's deputy, but al-Qaeda never selected Belmokhtar for a leadership position in AQIM (paldf.net, September 14, 2006). Al-Qaeda instead seemed to prefer the more obedient and cerebral Droukdel. Belmokhtar's legacy will also be mixed because his AQIM and other al-Qaeda-

aligned Sahelian jihadist successors have in the years since his death moved away from targeting Westerners in spectacular attacks. Rather, they have focused mostly on targeting the Malian and neighboring countries' militaries or UN-backed military forces in the region. Thus, there have been increasingly few jihadist attacks that remind observers of the attacks that Belmokhtar perpetrated against Westerners.

While confirmation of Belmokhtar's death may be a relief for Western countries, Western corporations, and Sahelian militaries, details about how Belmokhtar died have still not been disclosed. Unless any government reveals additional information, details about Belmokhtar's death will seemingly have to emerge from jihadist memoirs. No such memoirs may eventually be published and, therefore, a mystery will continue to hover over Belmokhtar's record into the future.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund: The UN-Sanctioned Theologian Leading the Taliban Government in Afghanistan

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

Mullah Muhammad Hassan Akhund is the new Prime Minister of Afghanistan in the Taliban's interim government formed in September (Dawn, September 7). The Taliban captured Kabul on August 15, but delayed the announcement of the interim government twice. Its ministers were ultimately unveiled after three weeks on September 7. The reasons for these delays were the discord and infighting, mainly between the "Doha faction," led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, and the Haqqani

Network, a militant group within the Taliban movement that controls eastern Afghanistan ([One India](#), September 7).

Mullah Akhund's appointment by the Taliban as head of the interim government not only tells a story of internal divisions among Taliban factions, but also of the Taliban's consensus-driven governing style and compromise of a candidate who is respected by all factions. He was further backed by the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Haibatullah. Hence, Mullah Akhund's appointment represented both division and unity among Taliban factions.

Akhund's Early Life and Education

Mullah Akhund is believed to have been born in the late 1940s or early 1950s in Pashmul village in the Panjwai district of Kandahar province and he belongs to the Kakar tribe of the Pashtuns ([UN](#), November 29, 2011). His Pashtun lineage descends from Ahmad Shah Durani, the founder of the Durani Empire in 1747. He has written many books on Islam and received education from various religious seminaries in Afghanistan ([Right Pakistan](#), September 8; [Express Tribune](#), September 8). Although the Taliban is the successor of the Afghan mujahideen, who fought against Soviet forces during the 1980s, Akhund was not among them. Nevertheless, he could not complete his education because of the fighting ([Express Tribune](#), September 8).

Akhund is a strict follower of the Islamic Deobandi school of thought and is a religious leader, rather than an inherently political figure. Nevertheless, his nomination as Prime Minister in the Taliban's interim government means he has been assigned a political role. His influence and control over the Taliban's Rehbari Shura, or "leadership council," also

provides him a strong role in military affairs ([DNAIndia](#), September 8).

Coming from Kandahar, the birthplace and spiritual heartland of the Taliban movement, Akhund was among the founders of the Taliban ([Express Tribune](#), September 8). He was also a teenage friend, close associate and political adviser to Mullah Umar, the founder of the Taliban, during its first period of rule in Afghanistan in the late 1990s. In December 2009, he became a member of the Taliban's supreme council ([UN](#), November 29, 2011).

Under the first Taliban administration from 1996 to 2001, Mullah Akhund held key positions, including the governor of Kandahar province, foreign minister, and deputy Prime Minister, in addition to being a close aide to Mullah Omar. Akhund was accordingly on the UN sanctions list ([The News](#), September 8). Since the late 1990s, Mullah Akhund has not lost his prominent position on the Rehbari Shura and has remained a close aide to different Taliban leaders, including Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, who succeeded Mullah Umar after his death. Mansoor himself was killed in a US drone strike in 2016 ([Dawn](#), May 22, 2016). He was then succeeded by Maulvi Haibatullah Akhundzada, the current Taliban leader, whose close aide was Mullah Akhund himself. ([Express Tribune](#), September 8).

Mullah Akhund's Conservative Approach to Interpreting Islamic Law

Under the first Taliban government, Mullah Akhund implemented his theocratic and conservative approach to interpreting Islam in his precepts and practice. The Taliban in 2001, for example, destroyed the tenth century giant statues of Buddha in the Bamiyan province after the Taliban's

Rehbari Shura ordered the movement to do so. Mullah Akhund had strongly supported the destruction of the statues and declared it the religious duty of Muslims ([NDTV](#), September 7). It was because of his role in the destruction of the statues in March 2001 that he was placed on the UN terrorist list ([India Today](#), September 7).

Moreover, Mullah Akhund has supported Taliban's anti-women policies, such as the bans restricting outside movement without a male relative, girls' education and women working in offices. Today, there is more semblance of his conservatism reflected in certain initiatives his government has taken since August. The government led by Mullah Akhund has abolished the women's ministry in Afghanistan, and replaced it with one of virtue and vice. The present Taliban government has not allowed women to work in government ministries with men. In the absence of a women's ministry, there is a large question mark about the empowerment, progress and rights of Afghan women under the Taliban government ([Dawn](#), September 17).

A Conciliatory Head of the Afghan Government?

Mullah Akhund's conciliatory language to deal with the Taliban's opponents and enemies reflects an apparent departure from the policy Taliban pursued under their previous administration more than 20 years ago. As the new head of the interim Afghan government, Mullah Akhund reiterated his commitment to an amnesty for Afghan people who were part of the now toppled Afghan government and worked to support U.S interests. He also pledged security for diplomats, embassies and humanitarian relief organizations in Afghanistan and announced the end of the Afghan war and the desire for good relations with other countries in the region

and internationally ([Radio Pakistan](#), September 9).

Putting Mullah Akhund's hardline views aside, he appears to be an astute politician struggling for international recognition of the Taliban government in Kabul. He appealed to the international community to provide aid to Afghanistan and for global institutions to release frozen funds after the Taliban took control of Kabul. He also demanded the lifting of sanctions on Taliban leaders. During a meeting with a WHO delegation, led by Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in Kabul, he stated "Pressure will not resolve the problems, they can be solved through dialogue. Those sanctions which are still in place should be removed" ([Express Tribune](#), September 21).

Conclusion

In all respects, Mullah Akhund has been an influential figure in the Taliban movement since its beginning in the 1990s. He is also the unifying and integrating force among different Taliban factions. Mullah Abdul Ghani Bradar was earlier projected as the head of the government, but some factions, particularly the Haqqani Network, opposed his appointment ([Economic Times](#), September 6).

Mullah Akhund emerged as an acceptable candidate to all factions in the Taliban movement. Despite the Taliban's conciliatory face this time, Afghanistan is likely to witness the repetition of the same conservatism and theocratic approach to interpreting Islam that took place from 1996-2001. What the world is likely to witness in a Mullah Akhund-led Afghanistan is the 'old wine in new bottle.' However, it is yet to be seen how much Mullah Akhund will make compromises on his hardline

views vis-a-vis women and empowering Afghans' civil rights to fulfil his commitments to the international community. Beyond this, it also remains to be seen to what extent the Taliban government remains committed to its promise of not allowing Afghanistan to become a launchpad for global terror attacks.

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

Guardian of Islamabad's Red Mosque: A Profile of Moulana Abdul Aziz

Farhan Zahid

Introduction

With the fall of Kabul on August 15 and the reestablishment of the Afghan Taliban government, an uptick in Islamist terrorism in neighboring Pakistan appears inevitable. Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is taking the lead in perpetrating terrorist strikes in Pakistan with a sharp surge of attacks in the Pakistani provinces of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan observed since August ([Terrorism Monitor](#), August 13). Besides terrorism, Islamist activism is also making inroads in Pakistani urban centers, including through the Red Mosque prayer leader (imam), Moulana Abdul Aziz. He is no newcomer in the resilient jihadist and Islamist landscape of Pakistan because he and his wife, Umme Hassan, and

younger brother, Abdul Rashid Ghazi, wreaked havoc in 2007 during the Red Mosque crisis, which led to the launch of a Pakistani military operation in July 2007, resulting in 102 fatalities, including 10 Special Forces personnel ([Dawn](#), July 13, 2007). With the return of the Afghan Taliban next door, Aziz is back on the scene in Pakistan with open support for the Afghan Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and vowing to implement Sharia law in Pakistan.

Aziz's Background and Burka Embarrassment

Born into an ultra-orthodox Deobandi clerical family in the rural and underdeveloped Rojhan subdivision of the Rajanpur district of Punjab province in 1963, Aziz received his early education in Islamabad where his father, Molvi Abdullah, was then located. He had been given control of the central mosque of Islamabad (commonly known as Lal Masjid, or "Red Mosque," because of its red brick structure) by then-military ruler of Pakistan General, Ayub Khan. Aziz later attended Jamia Dar ul Islamia and received a degree in Islamic theology ([Terrorism Monitor](#), July 19, 2007). [1]

As adherents of the Deobandi sect, Aziz's family was known for its radical Islamist views. It is not known how Ayub Khan knew Molvi Abdullah, but under Khan's patronage he managed to attain influence during those times. Under the leadership of Molvi Abdullah and his eldest son, Aziz, the Red Mosque eventually became a transit point for mujahadeen travelling to fight against Soviet forces in Afghanistan during the Afghan War from 1979-1989 ([Dawn](#), July 13, 2007).

At that time, foreign Islamist fighters flocked to Pakistan, which was serving as

the main conduit for the Afghan Jihad. Molvi Abdullah trained Aziz as his future heir until Abdullah's death in 1998 outside Red Mosque, when unknown armed assailants shot him dead ([Reuters Asia](#), 2007). As expected, Aziz swore in as the new imam of the Red Mosque and his younger brother, Abdul Rashid, who was initially not interested in Islamism or jihadism, joined as Aziz's deputy and the principal of Faridia Madrasah (a religious seminary associated with the Red Mosque conglomerate of seminaries). [2]

It turned out unexpectedly that Abdul Rashid became far more radical in approach than Aziz, with his militant vigilante activities in 2007 leading to the point that Pakistan's military leadership under General Musharraf launched a military operation to curb the violent activities at the Red Mosque. Aziz was forced to join Abdul Rashid, but managed to flee the mosque before the start of the operation. As he was escaping the besieged mosque while wearing a burka as disguise, he was caught, much to his own embarrassment. The incident was highlighted by the then-military government, which made Aziz a laughing stock ([Dawn](#), July 5, 2007).

Aziz was arrested and cases of terrorism and arson were lodged against him. However, Abdul Rashid and his militants were killed in a pitched battle with Pakistani Special Forces who were sent to take back control of the mosque. Aziz, meanwhile, remained in prison for the next two years, but was released on bail by the courts in 2009. He then, once again, assumed the role of prayer leader at the Red Mosque.

Aziz's Relations with Al-Qaeda, Islamic State, and Other Militants

Aziz's father, Molvi Abdullah, had longtime relations with the al-Qaeda leadership when they all remained active in supporting the mujahideen in the Afghan War during the 1980s. With the return of al-Qaeda to Afghanistan in the mid-1990s from Sudan, the relationship was reinvigorated. During the Red Mosque siege and its aftermath in July 2007, for example, al-Qaeda issued statements condemning the military operation against the Red Mosque militants, including those belonging to Ghazi Force, which was a terrorist group established by remnants of the Red Mosque militants. They had sought refuge at al-Qaeda safe havens in the tribal areas of Pakistan in 2007 and launched a number of terrorist attacks in Islamabad thereafter ([BBC Asia](#), July 27, 2007).

Aziz's father was a staunch supporter of Islamist militant movements across the globe. Following his lead, Aziz continued to support al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban and at one time Islamic State (IS) during its peak in 2015 and 2016. In 2014, on Aziz's instigation, the female students of Jamia Hafsa religious seminary raised IS flags at the mosque, demanded the proclamation of an Islamic Caliphate in Pakistan, and pledged allegiance to the then-IS caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ([Express Tribune](#), December 14, 2014).

Like his father, Aziz had also developed strong relationships with Pakistani Islamist terrorist groups. He befriended a range of such groups operating in Kashmir such as Jaish e Mohammad, Harkat ul Mujahideen (HuM) and the anti-Shia sectarian militants in Lashkar e Jhangvi. Above all, however, he openly supports TTP, which is the most lethal of all Islamist terrorist groups operating in Pakistan. All of the TTP leaders

have paid visits to Aziz during times of need. HuM amir, Fazal ur Rehman Khalil, even attempted to negotiate with the government during the Red Mosque crisis in 2007 and remained a frequent visitor of Red Mosque to hold meetings with Aziz. [3]

Aziz has remained a firm supporter of the Afghan Taliban and held demonstrations outside the Red Mosque and also in Islamabad in support of the Afghan Taliban's victory against the U.S. and Afghan forces. Furthermore, Aziz celebrated the fall of Kabul on August 15 by congratulating Afghan Taliban leadership and raising Afghan Taliban flags at the Red Mosque. Aziz has remained in the headlines since the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Kabul as well. Students of Jamia Hafsa Madrasah also demonstrated in front of the Red Mosque in support of the Afghan Taliban by hoisting flags and chanting anti-American slogans. Aziz also demanded implementation of sharia along similar lines in Pakistan as that of the Taliban in Afghanistan without any delay ([India Today](#), August 22).

His open support to the Afghan Taliban indeed perturbed the Pakistani government, which has since managed to shut down his pro-Afghan Taliban activities by directing the Islamabad police to act against Aziz. A heavy contingent of police, for example, reached the Red Mosque and the flags were removed. The mosque area was also put under surveillance by the police ([Dawn](#), August 21).

Conclusion

Aziz can best be described as an opportunistic pro-jihadist imam, who plays his cards whenever he sees any jihadist development unfolding, be it in Pakistan's neighborhood or further abroad. Unlike his

younger brother, Abdul Rashid, who was killed by the Pakistani military in 2007, Aziz does not confront the security forces violently, although he neither condemns Islamist terrorist attacks. Rather, Aziz holds demonstrations in support of violent Islamist and sectarian terrorist groups. His ambitions appear to be seeking media attention and remaining in the public eye in order to stay afloat in the jihadist landscape of Pakistan.

Thus far, Aziz has been successful in managing his credentials in the Pakistani jihadist scene. He has regained his position of imam at the Red Mosque, which was given to another imam during his time in prison. He is again on the streets of Islamabad glorifying the Afghan Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan. Currently, Aziz's fate is uncertain. He has not been able to create as much havoc in Islamabad as his brother had done during the Red Mosque crisis of 2007, but it can be expected that he will strengthen his position among jihadists because of the growing Islamist tendencies in Pakistan after the takeover of Afghanistan by the Afghan Taliban in August. Pakistani security officials and policy makers will need to contain Aziz's activities to curb an upsurge of Islamist violent activities in Pakistan.

Farhan Zahid has done his Ph.D. in Counter Terrorism (Topic: Al-Qaeda-linked Islamist violent Non-State Actors in Pakistan and their relationship with Islamist Parties) from Vrije University Brussels, Belgium. He writes on counter-terrorism, al-Qaeda, Pakistani Al-Qaeda-linked groups, Islamist violent non-state actors in Pakistan, militant landscapes in Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban.

Notes

1. Discussions with Azaz Syed, a senior journalist based in Islamabad, October 18, 2021.
2. Discussions with a retired police officer who served in Islamabad on October 18, 2021.
3. Discussions with Azaz Syed on October 18, 2021.

The Rise of Turji: The Notorious Bandit Leader Terrorizing Northwestern Nigeria

Idris Mohammed

On February 2, an armed group leader appeared in a short video clip and threatened to invite terrorists and other criminal armed groups from neighboring African countries to destabilize Nigeria. The clip was captured during a reconciliation event organized in the forest by self-appointed negotiator and renowned Nigerian Islamic cleric, Dr. Ahmad Gumi. The person behind the threat was Turji Kachalla, who many also known as Bello Gudde or Muhammad Bello ([HumAngle](#), February 4).

Turji is 27-years old, has wives and children, and was born and raised in the pastoral Fulani settlements of the Shinkafi community in that state of Zamfara, where he became a champion among Fulani youths because of his hatred for any tribe or group who looks down upon the Fulani or their cattle. It was said that Turji fought many local farmers in Shinkafi communities before he finally joined a Fulani militia armed group under the leadership of Buharin Daji, a well-known bandit, now deceased ([Militant Leadership](#),

[Monitor](#), March 2021). He began a career in banditry as a low-level member who had no strong link to the then high-level leader Buharin Daji.

From 2011 to 2018, Buharin Daji was the most dangerous bandit leader who masterminded many assaults and deadly attacks in Zamfara and other Northwestern states. In 2016, the former governor of Zamfara, Abdulaziz Yari, engaged Daji in peace talks. Daji agreed to cease hostilities but later relapsed and renewed attacks in the state. Daji's career, however, was ended by one of his lieutenants, Dogo Gide, who killed him in their camp at Madada forest in Dansadau District, Zamfara ([Daily Trust](#), March 15, 2018).

Turji's Leadership Style

Turji was mentored by Halilu Subutu, who was also a notorious bandit leader terrorizing community of Zamfara and Sokoto states, and Shehu Rekeb. He respected them because of their coordination and connections with other Sahelian jihadists. Turji, however, started building his criminal network with members of his close family who were mostly orphans. In his interaction with Dr. Gumi, Turji revealed that most of his fighters were victims of injustice after their means of livelihood were disrupted by Nigerian authorities and the civilian joint task force (Yan Sakai) after which no one offered to help them. As a result of this, Turji and his accomplices started funding their criminal group by rustling cows belonging to innocent people in the region in order to buy weapons ([TheCable.ng](#), February 13). Turji leveraged his connections and young age, which gave him an upper hand in successfully recruiting other young Fulani combatants from different camps in Zamfara, including Zurmi, Sabon Birni, Anka and other communities. There is little

knowledge of the exact numbers of his field soldiers, but he is believed to have at least 200 members under his control in communities east of Shinkafi and in Zurmi, while other commanders are in charge of Isa and Sabon Birni in Sokoto State. Most of his foot soldiers are under 20 years-old and are popularly known as “Yan Shabakwai” in the Hausa language, which means “seventeen years” ([Leadership.ng](#), February 5).

Turji’s Attacks on Civilians

In July, Turji took more than 200 people hostage, killed 63 people, and set over 338 houses ablaze in Shinkafi in an attempt to compel security forces to release his father, who was detained by Nigerian security agencies because of his son’s involvement in criminal armed banditry activities in the state. Turji vowed that he would release those he seized only after his father had been freed. His father had relocated to Jigawa State after he failed to stop his son from committing terror-related activities in Zamfara. Turji, however, accused Shinkafi locals of leaking information to the security agencies on his father’s whereabouts. The government finally had to intervene by sending a mediator to hand over Turji’s father in exchange for the release of more than 200 abductees ([Daily Trust](#), July 19).

Several days before the telecommunications shutdown in Zamfara in September, Turji also attacked Sabon Birni, Sokoto State, where more than 14 villages were forcibly deserted, 1,000 cattle were rustled, and an unspecified number of residents fled their communities to Maradi, Niger as refugees ([21st Century Chronicle](#), August 10). The most recent attack that generated attention was Turji’s attack on a joint military base, codenamed Burkusuma Camp, also in

Sabon Birni. The camp is located specifically in Dama community, which is another community in Sokoto that has been facing frequent attacks from Turji and his allies. An unspecified number of security agents were killed at Burkusuma Camp, while military vehicles were burnt and rifles and other important military supplies were pilfered. The attack forced the military forces to flee to a community at the border area with Niger called Basira. The Nigerian military claimed the attack was carried out by Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), despite the fact that Turji claimed responsibility ([thewhistler.ng](#), September 27).

Turji further abducted the Zamafara state speaker’s father, stepmother, and siblings. The families spent over two months in his custody because he declined any ransom to release the hostages ([Premiumtimesng.com](#), September 16). Eight weeks after the abduction in October, Turji informed the family a day before their rescue by security forces that their father had died due to heart failure in captivity ([Leadership.ng](#), October 2).

Reconciliation and Amnesty

Dr. Ahmad Gumi is a prominent and controversial Islamic cleric who often criticizes Nigerian authorities for using military force against bandits. He, for example, argued in a long post on his Facebook page titled “Zamfara: The Flaring Of Crisis” that military action against criminal herdsmen and bandits will not solve the security challenge, but “will only worsen the situation” ([Globaltimesng.com](#), September 6). On February 2, Gumi, who believes that the Fulani face discrimination in Nigeria, engaged Turji on reconciliation at Makkai forest in Zamfara. The event

hosted more than 200 of Turji`s soldiers who came heavily armed. Turji asserted that his combatants were not afraid to die and, even if he was eventually killed by Nigerian security forces, hundreds of his boys in different parts of northwestern Nigeria were ready to take over leadership from him (Saharareporters.com, February 3).

Turji has been accusing the Nigerian government and security agencies of maltreating the Fulani and singling them out as if they are not citizens of the country. He further insisted that he is more valuable in Shinkafi and neighboring communities than the security agencies because he is providing protection to locals. In addition, he alleged the Nigerian government and Zamfara State government had reneged on a series of promises while indigenes of Zamfara are stealing from and beating Fulanis on the roadways. Turji proudly concluded his speech by saying that only God knows how many weapons his fighters have and what they will do if they desired to fully destabilize the state.

For his part, Dr. Gumi asserted that Turji and his fighters are not afraid of death, and the majority of them are illiterates who need proper education and enlightenment. Gumi, therefore, opined that only reconciliation can end killings in Zamfara (Daily Trust, February 20). Turji had on multiple occasions rejected peace deals and amnesties from state governments.

Shinkafi residents and neighboring communities made several attempts to reconcile with him in order to have access to their farmlands, schools, hospitals and markets, but he declined their offers as well (Daily Trust, February 20).

Conclusion

The shutdown of telecommunications in Zamfara since September has forced Turji to relocate his headquarters from Fakai in Zurmi, Zamfara to the east of Isa in Sokoto State (Terrorism Monitor, September 24). The new headquarters is situated between Tozai and Suruddubu and, according to locals there, Turji visited several villages warning people to abide by his rules or risk his deadly attacks (Premiumtimesng.com, September 30). Turji`s headquarters in Tozai is very strategic because it will provide him an easy way of uniting with his mentor, Halilu Subutu. This will help Turji realize his goal of becoming the most powerful banditry leader controlling communities in Niger that share a border with Sokoto and will, therefore, also extend his banditry into another country. Given that negotiations with Turji have thus far failed to bring stability and security to the Nigeria-Niger border region, in addition to Zamfara, Sokoto, and other states, Turji`s influence will only continue to spread.

Idris Mohammed is an extremist terrorism and violent conflict researcher and journalist, writing from Northwest Nigeria. Contact him on Twitter @Edrees4P.