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A Glimpse Inside the Congolese Branch of Islamic State in Central Africa Province

Jacob Zenn

The Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP)'s Congolese branch has been expanding its operations from Congo into Uganda, while also officially being part of the same group as ISCAP's Mozambique branch ([Al-Jazeera](#), November 22, 2021). The leadership of ISCAP's two branches have remained unannounced by the branches themselves, but recent reporting from Congo has shed light on at least three of the Congolese branch's leaders. They are Muse Seka Baluku, Nasser Abdu Hamid Diiru, and Elias Segujja ([Radio Okapi](#), December 13, 2021).

Baluku's key role has been establishing a sustainable self-financing program for the Congolese branch. In particular, this program has focused on the timber trade between Congo, Uganda, and Kenya. He is also among the group members most

responsible for the group's predecessor, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF, becoming ISCAP because he succeeded ADF founder, Jamil Makulu, who was arrested in Tanzania in 2015 ([NTV Uganda](#), December 2, 2021)). Diiru, meanwhile, was an operational commander for the ADF since 2014 and continued in a similar role for ISCAP. Segujja, whose nickname is "Fezza," is a field commander responsible for ISCAP in Beni, which is the group's main area of operations in Congo. He also has a role in the group's financing operations and procurement of supplies ([U.S. Department of Treasury](#), December 10, 2019).

Other key members include Sheikh Lumisa and Abdulrahman Waswa. Lumisa, who joined the ADF as early as 1999 and is now in his 50s is the religious leader, controls the group's external communications, and functions as a sort of medical doctor for the group by providing members with supplies to care for their wounds. Waswa is the group's supreme judge. His responsibilities include organizing the group's Islamic police and ensuring internal discipline ([UN](#)

[Security Council](#), January 12, 2015). While many of these ISCAP leaders remain at large, the overall military commander, Rashid Hood Lukwongo, was killed in Beni in 2016 when the group was still known as the ADF. His alias was “Mzee Meya Pierro,” with “Mzee” referring to his being an “elder” like Lumisa and “Pierro” being the surname of an Italian soccer star ([Chimp Reports](#), January 13, 2020).

Alarming, ISCAP’s Congolese branch has increasingly resembled the Islamic State (IS) core. This is especially visible through its expansionary campaign in Uganda and in the evolution of its propaganda, having gone from wearing ragged clothing to outfits like IS wears. Further, the profiles of ISCAP’s Congolese branch’s leaders demonstrates that the leadership maintains a diversified organizational structure with different militant leaders managing a wide variety of roles from financing, to logistics, to battlefield strategy, to external communications with IS. These changes are not entirely surprising, however, as the group has historically hosted a small number of Middle Easterners deployed by IS to ISCAP’s jungle hideouts in Congo ([Twitter/@kyruer](#), April 19, 2019).

Previously, other African IS provinces had been underestimated, especially Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). The growing entrenchment of ISCAP in Beni and nearby parts of Congo, its expansion to Uganda, and its diverse leadership responsibilities and penetration into Uganda also points to the risk of underestimating ISCAP’s Congolese branch. Recent bombings by ISCAP in Uganda, which were carried out by two Ugandans, reinforce such concerns, as they demonstrate the leadership’s ability to

recruit and operate across borders ([Twitter/@mobilisingniger](#), November 17).

The real test for the ISCAP Congolese branch may only be weeks away due to a likely Congolese and Ugandan joint military offensive against the group ([Majalla](#), December 10, 2021). At the same time, Rwanda has been elevating its counter-terrorism profile throughout East Africa, including as far as Mozambique, while also combating what it terms “ADF militants” in neighboring Congo ([The New Times](#), October 6, 2021). If ISCAP’s Congolese branch can withstand these military pressures, the group will emerge stronger than before and will become even more coveted by IS core.

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A Profile of Jaal Marroo: The Leader of Ethiopia’s Oromo Liberation Army

Michael Horton

Jaal Marroo is the *nom de guerre* of Kumsa Diriba, who currently commands the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA). Marroo has been a commander in the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) since at least 2016, when he oversaw an OLF-led offensive in western sections of the state of Oromia. Since 2016, Marroo’s reputation as a leader and commander has resulted in his consolidation of control over the OLA and the group’s transition into a more formidable insurgent organization.

The OLA's Leadership Structure in Oromia

The OLA broke away from the OLF in 2018 in part due to the OLF's support for the peace agreement with the Ethiopian government. According to this agreement, the OLF agreed to demilitarize and enter the national political process ([The Reporter](#), August 11, 2018). The relationship between the adversarial organizations remains ambiguous and reflects the divisions within the OLF.

Marroo's leadership on and off the battlefield has played a key role in the formation and growth of the OLA. Since early this year, the OLA, along with its nominal ally, the Tigrayan Defense Forces (TDF), has intensified its military operations against forces loyal to Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ([Addis Standard](#), August 13, 2021). In response, the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) and allied militias have stepped up their own, often indiscriminate, attacks on targets within the regional state of Oromia ([Addis Standard](#), December 3, 2021). Similarly, the OLA is also accused of launching retaliatory attacks along ethnic lines ([Al-Jazeera](#), August 26, 2021).

The Oromo are Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, making up more than 34% of Ethiopia's population of 120 million. The state of Oromia is also the largest of the Ethiopian states and surrounds the country's capital of Addis Ababa (known as Finfinne to the Oromo). The OLF, which was founded in 1973, is dedicated to defending and promoting self-determination for the Oromo people. Following Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's rise to power in 2018, leaders of the OLF were brought into the political process after signing a peace agreement with the

government. Marroo and other leaders within the OLA refused disarmament and vowed to continue the fight for an autonomous Oromia.

While well organized, the OLA's leadership structure is purposefully decentralized. This is partly a reflection of cultural norms in Oromia and also a way to combat government efforts to kill or capture key leaders. The OLA also has a limited electronic footprint, is highly mobile, and operates in a densely forested territory which it knows well. [1] Thus, despite attempts to target Marroo, he routinely appears in villages and at encampments to deliver speeches to both soldiers and civilians. [2]

Marroo from Student Activist to Fighter

Marroo was educated at Addis Ababa University and has been active with the OLF, and now OLA, since his days as a student. He was arrested in 2003 for taking part in student-led protests against the government. Following his arrest and release, Marroo joined an underground Oromo youth movement.

After the movement's primary organizers were arrested, Marroo fled to the Borena zone in southern Oromia. There he received military training and began working his way up the ranks of the military wing of the OLF. After a 2008 government offensive against the armed wing of the OLF, Marroo escaped to Uganda. There, Ethiopian intelligence tracked him and tried to force the state government to extradite him. Instead, Marroo served a short prison sentence in Uganda ([The Africa Report](#), November 11, 2021).

The next stop for Marroo after Uganda was a brief exile in Eritrea, which hosted numerous anti-government groups, including the OLF. In 2010 or possibly 2011, Marroo returned to Oromia where he again led fighters. The period between 2012 and 2018 saw rapid growth of the armed wing of the OLF. This was partly in response to increased pressure, both military and political, from the government.

It is unclear how much of a role Marroo played during this period. However, given that he is a charismatic speaker and a clear survivor, it is likely that he played a significant part in reorganizing and revitalizing the armed wing of the OLF. Marroo and other senior commanders within what would become the OLA took advantage of internal splits within the OLF to consolidate their control of militias.

These militias operated under the umbrella of the OLF and were often subject to the whims of local commanders. Marroo and other senior leaders introduced a more structured chain of command and greater coordination between armed groups. Marroo, possibly as a result of training received in Eritrea, also introduced more formalized military and political education for recruits and existing members of the OLA. [3]

The OLA's Outlook Beyond Marroo

The OLA, which currently controls large swaths of territory northwest and west of Addis Ababa, has become a formidable rebel force. While the OLA does not possess the heavy weaponry of the TDF or its formal military training, it is well suited to the cultural and physical terrain in which it is fighting. The Ethiopian government has been forced to devote more and more

military resources to Oromia in an attempt to counter the OLA's hit and run attacks. These efforts to combat the OLA are likely to be disrupted by the vast terrain, growing public anger over government attacks, and charismatic leaders like Marroo. While Marroo has undoubtedly played a significant role in the formation and growth of the OLA, the current war will produce many more leaders and fighters like Marroo as it continues.

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Notes

[1] Author interview with an in-country journalist, November 2021.

[2] See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQIJZJeAnWA>.

[3] Author interview with an analyst based in the region, December 2021.

Sanan Khan Qureshi: A Pakistani Sindhi Nationalist Leader Struggling to Match His Predecessors

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

Sanan Khan Qureshi is the current chairman of Jeay Sindh Qaumi Mahaz ("Long live Sindh Nationalist Front," or

JSQM), a Sindhi nationalist and separatist political organization in Pakistan's southern province of Sindh. At the young age of 19 years, Sanan was elected unopposed as the JSQM chairman in September 2012. This accomplishment followed the death of his father, Bashir Khan Qureshi, who was the former JSQM chief ([The Nation](#), September 11, 2012).

Ghulam Murtaza Syed (G.M Syed), the veteran Sindhi nationalist leader, was the founder of Jeay Sindh Tehreek ("*Long Live Sindh Movement*"), a nationalist movement demanding an independent *Sindhudesh* (Sindhi country) for the Sindhi people. He died in 1995, but several Sindhi nationalist groups joined his movement under the umbrella of JSQM, which had been a committed Sindhi nationalist party since 1995. JSQM held protest rallies and long marches and staged sit-ins across the province on various issues, such as water crises, the arrival of illegal immigrants in Sindh, and the construction of mega-dams, to safeguard Sindhi rights.

Under the leadership of Sanan, however, JSQM has not been as active since 2012 as it was under his father ([Express Tribune](#), December 17, 2018). This disparity raises questions about the long-term viability of JSQM. In addition, it remains unknown whether JSQM will increasingly agitate against the Pakistani state and become outright militant or will only continue to stumble along while other Sindhi nationalist groups become comparatively more active and prominent.

Sanan Qureshi: A Leader by Choice?

Sanan Qureshi lives in Gulshan-e-Hadeed in Karachi, the provincial capital of Sindh. The sudden death of his father, Bashir Qureshi, shocked Sanan, who alleged the

death was due to poisoning by an unnamed culprit. Six months later, Sanan was given the responsibility of leading the party and replacing his father. JSQM elected him as the unopposed party chairman in September 2012, although he was not necessarily mentally prepared to hold the top position in the party.

For example, at that time in 2012, Sanan had no plans to join politics, as he was a student completing his two-year pre-university course at the Government Degree College in Ratodero, Sindh. On the occasion of his election as party head, the 19-year-old Sanan stated, "my father wanted me to study," and then while trying to impersonate his father's booming voice added, "I will try to make sure that my father's dreams come true" ([Express Tribune](#), September 11, 2012).

As party head, Sanan remained beleaguered by problems. The party witnessed a sharp decline in its antagonistic politics to the state under Sanan, who seemed unable to find the right time to carry on the ideological goals set by the party's founding leader, G.M Syed. In 2018, Sanan stated, "my father was killed because of the nationalist movement for the rights of people living in this land. Two years on, my uncle was burnt to death. One can't imagine the pressure on us." He also recalled that, "historically, we have witnessed the downfall of political movements in the world. We are waiting for the right time and hope to carry on the legacy of G.M Syed" ([Express Tribune](#), December 17, 2018).

Internal divisions and Conflict in Sanan Qureshi-led JSQM

The election of Sanan as JSQM chairman triggered internal conflict and divisions

within the party. Some senior leaders, covertly and overtly, opposed Sanan's leadership. Critics alleged that the top party leadership hijacked the party and several senior leaders and die-hard workers quit the party in the ensuing eight years after Sanan became leader. They contended that the top leadership continued to live in delusion and did not care about the political organization of the party.

As a result, under Sanan's chairmanship internal divisions and factions within the party immensely damaged JSQM. Dr. Niaz Kalani, a former senior vice-chairman of JSQM, lamented that Sanan had imposed a ban on the activities of leaders who dared to speak against his autocratic approach. Kalani asserted, "the party is not private property and can't be given to someone in inheritance. They have created such a situation that has forced us to quit the party" ([Express Tribune](#), December 17, 2018).

The attack on Bahria town in Karachi in June by the workers of different Sindhi nationalist parties, including JSQM, however, brought the Sanan into the politics of protest. Sanan was arrested during this violent protest over what he considered a mega-housing scheme ([The Nation](#), June 10, 2021). The Sindhi nationalist parties consider the construction of Bahria town to be illegal, as the land of local villagers has been grabbed by Bahria town, a mega-housing project, with the help of the Sindh provincial government. Thousands of protesters stormed into the town, torched its gate, and set fire to several vehicles, motorcycles, ships, and real estate offices. The police tried to disperse the protesters after arson attacks continued for nearly

half an hour. Sanan, along with other nationalist leaders, lambasted the Sindh government for its failure to protect Sindhi lands ([Dawn](#), June 7, 2021).

After being arrested by the police, Sanan was brought into an Anti-Terrorism Court (ATC) in Karachi in Bahria town. The court sent him into police custody for two days of judicial remand ([The Nation](#), June 10, 2021). JSQM followed by observing a shut-down in which shops, markets, and businesses closed in several cities and towns across Sindh to protest the arrest of its chairman. JSQM further held protest rallies and demanded the release of Sanan and other JSQM activists ([Dawn](#), June 9, 2021). Sanan was subsequently released from Karachi's Malir district jail in July on bail granted by the ATC ([Daily Outcome](#), July 19, 2021).

Conclusion

Thus far, Sanan Qureshi has not proven himself as a vocal and active Sindhi nationalist leader like his predecessors. Under Sanan's leadership, the political and organizational activities of JSQM have come to a halt. By comparison, the same nationalist party under his predecessors, including his father Bashir Qureshi, vociferously raised the issues and problems being faced by the Sindhi people. It organized rallies, staged sit-ins, and even observed hunger strikes to highlight the issues of water scarcity and illegal immigration in Sindh.

As a result, over the past eight years, other Sindhi nationalist parties, such as Sindh United Party (SUP) and Qaumi Awami Tehreek (QAT), have become more vocal on Sindh issues than JSQM. Sanan's arrest illustrates this perfectly. Specifically, JSQM was not even at the forefront of leading the protest against Bahria town, though it did

try to remain on the list of protesters along with other Sindhi nationalist parties.

In light of all this, it is fair to say that JSQM has been in a “wait and see” mode under Sanan’s leadership for the past eight years. Further, in the Bahria town case, Sanan told the court that his party believed in non-violence and that they had nothing to do with the violent incident ([The Nation](#), June 10, 2021). Therefore, there seems to be few prospects for the emergence of JSQM as a more violent group that would match the ferocity of its predecessors or other more violent militant groups in Sindh or Pakistan’s restive Balochistan Province.

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The Rise of Abdul Hakim al-Shishani: The Istanbul-Based Commander of Chechen Fighters in Idlib

Aslan Doukaev

In the secretive world of Chechen militants in Syria, the limelight often is shunned and garrulity is considered a sin. Propaganda videos posted online or occasional interviews with journalists or researchers rarely feature these fighters talking about their backgrounds or disclosing personal information. A great number of these militants are still known only by their *noms de guerre*, which at most reveal their ethnicity, such as “Shishani” for Chechen.

Contrary to the custom among Salafis, few Chechens adopt *kunyas*, or honorific names that refer to the bearers’ first-born son or daughter. Even some Chechen commanders of major factions operating in Syria manage to remain largely anonymous. Thus, it was likely an unpleasant surprise to Abdul Hakim al-Shishani, the leader of the Latakia-based Ajnad al-Kavkaz (AK) in Syria, when he inadvertently became embroiled in an international controversy after Turkish authorities arrested a group of Russian assassins in November that apparently had him as their prime target ([Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), November 9, 2021).

AK is a Sunni militant group that operates autonomously in Syria and is ideologically opposed to Islamic State (IS), al-Qaeda, and even the Caucasus Emirate ([From Chechnya to Syria](#), July 14, 2017). Al-Shishani had relations to the latter group in the past but has since broken ties with this organization. AK’s operational focus is strictly “on fighting Russia and the Syrian regime” ([Russia Matters](#), April 29, 2021).

Little is known about AK’s leader, al-Shishani, including his exact first name or his birth date. While analysts agree that al-Shishani’s real surname is Azhiyev, there is no consensus on his given name. Foreign researchers tend to refer to him as Rustam, but Russian sources have increasingly been identifying him as “field commander [...] Ruslan Azhiyev” ([Lenta](#), November 2, 2021; [Obshchaya Gazeta](#), November 3, 2021). Russia’s financial intelligence unit, Rosfinmonitoring, lists a Ruslan Azhiyev, who was born on April 12, 1981 in the Chechen village of Prigorodnoye in its register of “terrorists and extremists” ([Federal Service for Financial Monitoring](#)). The profile seems to fit al-Shishani in every way. However, as no militant affiliation of

the man in question is mentioned, additional evidence is needed to affirm if Ruslan is indeed the real name of the Latakia-based leader of AK.

The Origins of Abdul Hakim al-Shishani's Career

Abdul Hakim al-Shishani began his career as a professional militant in the rebel brigades of the Second Chechen War in the early 2000s. His exploits in that conflict were generally unremarkable. However, at some point at the end of 2007, he was promoted to lead the Caucasus Emirate's Central Sector in Chechnya. In 2009, when the young commander was seriously wounded, he sought medical treatment in Turkey and was subsequently unable to return to Chechnya ([From Chechnya to Syria](#), April 4, 2015).

He would probably still be languishing in an Istanbul working class suburb if it had not been for the 2011 revolution in neighboring Syria, which was met with brutal violence by the Syrian government and soon devolved into a full-blown armed conflict with different regional and international powers supporting various sides. Never the ones to miss a good opportunity to stick it to a Russian-backed regime, Chechen war veterans, including al-Shishani, headed for Syria. In Syria, they quickly gained prominence as tough fighters and capable battlefield commanders.

By mid-2014, al-Shishani was already in charge of his own fighting unit that would eventually grow into one of the largest foreign-led groups in Syria with an estimated 100 to 200 fighters ([The Intercept](#), September 3, 2016; [Diyaruna](#), January 9, 2018). AK, which is comprised mostly, but not exclusively, of Chechens, played a substantial role in the fighting in

Idlib and Latakia provinces. As other North Caucasian groups have disbanded or been subsumed into other groups, AK continues on, although inter-rebel conflicts, which AK is loath to get involved in, compelled it to temporarily suspend its operations in 2017 ([From Chechnya to Syria](#), October 5, 2017).

Ajnad al-Kavkaz' Challenges

The main challenge for AK, like many other small factions, has been facing the obsessive, but perhaps inevitable, drive by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the most powerful rebel group in the Idlib Governate of Syria, to establish its dominance. Idlib is, after all, the last stronghold of the insurgency against the regime of Bashar al-Assad ([Terrorism Monitor](#), October 13, 2020; [Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), August 2, 2021). Since 2017, HTS has been steadily sidelining rival factions and cracking down on groups that do not recognize its authority or that seek to preserve their autonomy. Examples include Abdul Hakim al-Shishani's fighters in AK and Junud al-Sham, which is led by another veteran Chechen commander, Muslim al-Shishani. Junud al-Sham, which is HTS's latest target, was forced to leave its positions in the forested hills of Jabal al-Turkman in Latakia's countryside after a confrontation with HTS fighters. This incident occurred after HTS had been trying to dismantle the 70-man strong faction for months ([Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), August 2, 2021).

Thus far, AK has managed to avoid a head-on clash with HTS, thanks in no small measure to AK's relative strength and al-Shishani's leadership tact. That does not mean AK resists acting against the adversarial moves taken by HTS, however. On one occasion, after HTS had prevented AK from taking part in a fight against al-

Assad's forces in southern rural Idlib, AK accused the larger HTS of "handing the region over to the regime" and focusing its efforts on expelling anti-government groups from the area under its control ([Diyaruna](#), January 9, 2018).

Like other Chechen militant factions, AK has always sought to preserve its independence because its ultimate goal, which it has never concealed, is to return to Chechnya ([Islamic History Video](#), September 26, 2013; [The Intercept](#), September 3, 2016). Swearing allegiance to HTS, which itself was originally an al-Qaeda affiliate, would indicate AK is subordinating itself to another militant group with its own agenda and a history of ties to al-Qaeda. That would surely damage the prospects of returning to any homeland, let alone the North Caucasus.

At the same time, al-Shishani never shunned alliances or glorified in the fancied freedom of his isolation. In the past, he coordinated at least some military operations with HTS. Such coordination had clear practical utility in ensuring AK's survival, but it is unclear how long this coexistence can last considering HTS's ruthless push for hegemony in northwestern Syria.

What Next for Abdul Hakim al-Shishani?

Al-Shishani has been sighted frequently in Istanbul where he has been invited to mediate in various intra-Chechen disputes. [1] Unlike other Chechen war veterans, who keep a very low profile, al-Shishani continues to network with local support communities in Istanbul and has even

become involved with groups that attempt to prevent the infiltration of exile circles by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's emissaries. In early September, he forced a former Chechen policeman, who planned to set up home in Istanbul but was suspected by local Chechens to be a Kadyrov agent, to condemn the pro-Moscow regime in Chechnya on camera. Soon thereafter, the former policeman fled Turkey for Chechnya, where, apparently at the instigation of Chechnya's authorities, he "declared a blood feud against four Chechen families," including al-Shishani's, or specifically the Azhiyevs ([Kavkazsky Uzel](#), September 9, 2021).

Turkish authorities allege that the hit-squad tasked with assassinating al-Shishani was acting "on the orders of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov" ([Daily Sabah](#), November 2, 2021). That seems very plausible as the Chechen leader is known for taking any hostile action against, or even criticism of, his authority as a personal affront. It is not clear if al-Shishani will permanently remain in his base in Istanbul, but he seems to be very close to establishing himself as an informal leader of the pro-separatist Chechen émigré community there ([Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), November 9, 2021). The failed attempt to assassinate him indicates that this fact did not go unnoticed in Russia.

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Note

[1] The sightings of al-Shishani in Istanbul were reported to the author by the author's Chechen sources.