



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

p.1

Briefs

*Jacob Zenn & Joseph
Brennan*

p.3

The Life and 50-Year
Struggle of Baluch
Nationalist Mir Yousuf
Mastikhan

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

p.5

Who is Muslim Khan
and Why Does the
Pakistani Taliban
Demand his Release?

Zia Ur Rehman

p.8

The New Caliph of IS:
the Winding Career of
Bashar Khattab Ghazal
al-Sumaida

Daniele Garofalo

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Abraham Amuta: A Post-Mortem of the Christian Who Became the Boko Haram Leader's Bodyguard

Jacob Zenn

Abraham Amuta presents a unique case of how an abducted Christian-born Nigerian eventually became a high-level Boko Haram commander. Amuta did not fit the description of typical Boko Haram member, given he was well-educated and originally committed to service to Nigeria and Western education, not to mention his being a faithful Christian. Nevertheless, the turn of events in his life when he was kidnapped by Boko Haram in 2019 changed his ideology and fate forever and ultimately resulted in his death at the hands of rival faction earlier this year.

The extent of Amuta's sea change was revealed in February 2020 when civil society representatives who specialize in engaging Boko Haram on hostage exchanges and members of Amuta's former church traveled to Boko Haram territory to take him back home after negotiations resulted in Boko Haram

allowing his freedom. Although Boko Haram permitted Amuta to leave the camp, the negotiators found that Amuta genuinely did not want to return home. Rather, Amuta told the negotiators, including his former university roommate, that he had converted to Islam and would stay with Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau's fighters (dailytrust.com, February 2, 2020). Despite only several months in captivity, Amuta had apparently already been indoctrinated into Boko Haram's ideology and been put under Shekau's ideological spell.

Reason exists to believe that Boko Haram would really have released Amuta. Only three months earlier, the group released Moses Oyeleke, an elder pastor at Amuta's church who was kidnapped alongside Amuta in Borno state, Nigeria. Oyeleke noted after his release that the group had also tried to convert him to Islam, but, unlike Amuta, he refused while acting respectfully towards Islam (saharareporters.com, November 12, 2019). Videos and photos of Oyeleke's retrieval by the negotiators revealed how armed and uniformed Boko Haram fighters were based in deep hideouts in the bush

and how any escape would have been incredibly difficult ([Desert Herald](#), November 11, 2019). In addition, along with Oyekele, a young woman who had been kidnapped was also released by Boko Haram, further indicating Boko Haram's willingness to negotiate Amuta's release as well ([punchng.com](#), November 12, 2019).

After Amuta decided to stay with Boko Haram, he appeared in a Boko Haram video in April 2021 in which the group claimed to have shot down a Nigerian airforce plane. In the video, Amuta stood over the downed jet, wore military fatigues, and stated that he was calling on the "infidels to repent" or else they would become victims of the "mujahideen" ([Telegram](#), April 3, 2021). His appearance in the video shows he was truly among Boko Haram fighters and in the heart of their battles. Moreover, Boko Haram's rarely allowing anyone but Shekau to speak in videos indicated Amuta held a special status within the group.

Less than one year after this video's emergence, however, the Nigerian media source HumAngle, which has managed to obtain exclusive access to Boko Haram, reported that the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) killed Amuta during its offensive to capture Shekau in early 2021 ([HumAngle](#), February 9). Shekau's closest commanders, including Amuta, were killed while trying to protect Shekau. However, Shekau himself eventually detonated a suicide bomb to kill himself before capture ([Vanguard News](#), June 18).

Amuta's case more broadly resembles the case of the more than 250 kidnapped Chibok girls, most of whom were Christian. While 102 of them were released by Boko Haram through negotiations and a few escaped and several dozen died in captivity, there were also several dozen who voluntarily chose to remain with Boko Haram even though, like Amuta, they were free to leave ([allafrica.com](#), January 16, 2018). These girls had been 'married' to Boko Haram members and gave birth to children with those members. In addition

to psychological pressure, this likely affected their decision to remain with Boko Haram. Nevertheless, their case and that of Amuta's seem to show how despite Boko Haram's antipathy towards Christians and executions of Christians, the group has managed to 'convert' some abducted Christian men and girls into becoming faithful followers of the movement.

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Islamic State Inspires Lone Wolf Attackers in Israel

Joseph Brennan

On March 27, 2022, two gunmen opened fire at a bus stop in Hadera, Israel, [killing two police officers](#) and wounding several other people. Footage of the attack showed the men firing machine guns, and [evidence](#) from the crime scene showed they were armed with multiple handguns as well. Video footage of the Hadera attack also captured the gunmen picking up the weapon of one of the police officers before continuing the bloodshed. Decisively, the assailants were shot dead by undercover counter-terrorism officers who happened to be close by. The two police officers killed in the attack were named [Yazan Fallah](#) and Shirel Aboukaret, the terrorists who killed them were a pair of cousins: Ayman and Ibrahim Ighbariya.

Shortly after the attack, [a video](#) was found on the assailant's Facebook page, showing that they had pledged their loyalty to IS and its new caliph, Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, before they took aim at Israel. IS immediately claimed the attack in the aftermath, making it the first one claimed by the group since 2017, and it follows in the middle of now three terror attacks in Israel over the past week. The history of the attackers, a pair of [IS commandos](#) according to the terror group, is largely a mystery, but a few pieces can

be put together concerning their background and radicalization before this event.

Ayman and Ibrahim Ighbariya were both Israeli-Arabs – Palestinians -- born and raised in the town of Umm el-Fahm, about 25 kilometers east of Hadera. Currently, Israeli special units are operating in the Umm el-Fahm sector to make further arrests because of the incident, in order to investigate how it began. According to [local sources](#), the cousins had links to IS since 2016 and 2017 respectively. Ibrahim was arrested by Turkish authorities in 2016 for attempting to join IS in Syria via Turkey. He was detained in the Turkish city of Gaziantep, about 40km from the border with Syria, and sent back to Israel. [During interrogations](#) at that time (he was aged 23), Ibrahim said he began embracing the ideology of IS after “watching videos and reading information published by the organization”. Originally, when Ibrahim left Israel, he left a letter for his family informing them he was joining the jihad, and a few friends knew of his decision as well. [According to Shin Bet officials](#) at the time of Ibrahim’s arrest, “this case and other similar cases serve as a reminder of the results of youth exposure to ISIS content and videos on the internet.” His cousin, Ayman, was later arrested for three weeks in 2017 on charges of weapons violations.

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The Life and 50-Year Struggle of Baluch Nationalist Mir Yousuf Mastikhan

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

The 77-year old Mir Yousuf Mastikhan [1] is a veteran Baluch nationalist and separatist leader, who has continued his struggle with various political parties in Pakistan. Presently, Mastikhan is the

president of Baluch Muttahida Mahaz (BMM), or the Baluch United Front. This is a Baluch nationalist party struggling for the rights of Baluch people in Baluchistan and other Baluch-dominated areas of the country.

Although Mastikhan has been practicing a form of “militant politics” for the rights of Baluch people for more than 50 years, he became frustrated with the political part of the struggle. He is now raging against the civil and military establishment of Pakistan. In this regard, he may now be considered a bona fide separatist leader.

Arrest of Mastikhan on Sedition Charges in Gwadar

In December 2021, Mastikhan was arrested by the police for making a “provocative and anti-state” speech at a protest sit-in in Gwadar, the southern port city in Baluchistan. Gwadar police seized him from a hotel where he was staying and later produced him before a sessions court. The court remanded him to police custody for one day ([Dawn](#), December 10, 2021).

Thousands of Gwadar residents, including women, held the month-long protest sit-in under the umbrella of the “Gwadar ko haq do” (Give rights to Gwadar) movement. They sought to draw attention to shortages of drinking water, the negative impacts of big fishing trawlers on local fishermen’s earnings, and the poor state of health and education facilities in Gwadar. The legitimate demands were ultimately accepted by the government and they called off their month-long protest. ([The News](#), December 16, 2021)

Mastikhan’s arrest on charges of sedition for delivering a speech “against state institutions” at the protest sit-in in Gwadar was based on his saying that “Baluchistan was forcibly made part of Pakistan in 1947.” He further stated that he considered the people of Baluchistan to be “slaves.” It was also alleged in a First Information Report (FIR) registered against him that he blamed Pakistan for stealing gas from

Baluchistan province since 1953 ([Friday Times](#), December 9, 2021). Mastikhan was, however, released within two days from Gwadar jail after a local court ordered his release on the surety bond of Rs100,000 ([Dawn](#), December 11, 2021). Many social and political circles, including the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), condemned the arrest of Mastikhan, who is suffering from cancer ([Friday Time](#), December 9, 2021).

Mastikhan's Early Life and Struggle

Born in Karachi on July 16, 1948, Mastikhan received his school education in that same city. He later obtained his graduate degree from Government National College in Karachi in 1968. He then started his political career with the Baluch Student Organisation (BSO) in the 1960s and joined many political parties and forums, including the National Democratic Party (NDP), Pakistan National Party (PNP), Awami Workers Party (AWP), National Awami Party (NAP), and BMM. Through the latter organization, he vociferously raised his voice for the rights of discriminated ethnicities and exploited communities ([Karachi Literature Festival](#), 2021).

Throughout his 50-year career, Mastikhan remained active in forming political alliances, multi-party forums, and movements. For example, he actively participated in the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) in the 1980s, Sindh Indigenous Rights Alliance, and Sindh Progressive Committee (SPC), which comprised the left wing and nationalist parties. ([Naya Daur TV](#), July 17, 2020, [Express Tribune](#), April 17, 2012)

Mastikhan's stint with NAP began when he joined the organization along with Lala Lal Bakhsh Rind, a die-hard Marxist who was one of the founding members of the BSO. Rind had also been a close aide of prominent Baluch nationalists, including Mir Gul Khan Naseer, Sardar Ataullah Mengal, Khair Baksh Marri, and Mir Ghous Baksh Bizenjo, until his death in August 2010 at the age of 78. Mastikhan was

deeply impressed with the ideological commitment and political activism of Rind and once paid tribute to him, saying, "It is today that we need activists like Rind in contemporary politics" ([The News](#), August 17, 2015).

Mastikhan's Ideology

As a Baluch nationalist leader, Mastikhan believes that "Pakistan is a multinational state and each nation has a full-fledged right to its resources and to run its affairs." He strongly condemns military operations against Baluch groups and demands an end to the army operations in Baluchistan and the release of all arrested and missing Baluch activists ([Beenasarwar.com](#), August 25, 2011). In particular, he has been opposing military operations in which people "disappear" or are allegedly killed and dumped without being produced in a court of law.

Consistent with this, BMM is a Karachi-based party calling for the protection of Baluch rights, particularly in Baluch majority areas of Karachi, Pakistan's largest city, such as the Lyari and Malir districts. As the leader of BMM, Mastikhan brought attention to the problems and issues of Baluch areas by holding rallies and meetings. For example, last year, he organized a conference on the sale and purchase of narcotics in Baluch areas and became a powerful voice in Baluch neighborhoods against the menace of drug use. He bitterly criticized the anti-narcotics force, police, and other law enforcement agencies for not taking steps to curb the spread of drugs and announced a protest rally from Lyari to Malir against drug trafficking in Baluchistan ([The News](#), June 1, 2021)

Being a Baluch nationalist and a leader of the National Workers' Party (NWP), Mastikhan also raised his voice for hardline Sindhi nationalist parties and supported their demand for a "multi-nation" state of Pakistan. This involves the recognition of Sindhi, Baluch, Pashtun, Seraiki, and Punjabi areas as independent units of the

state. He further demanded the restoration of the historical status of the independent states of Sindh and Baluchistan and claimed that both provinces had not historically been the administrative units ([Dawn](#), July 27, 2004).

Conclusion

The era of Mastikhan's political struggle has spanned more than five decades. He has been a Baluch nationalist and essentially an anti-establishment politician and activist. He participated in the struggle against military dictators for the restoration of democracy. For example, he even joined MRD to fight against the military rule of General Zia ul Haq in the 1980s. As a nationalist leader, he fought for the rights of Baluch people and vociferously condemned military operations against separatists in Baluchistan.

In December 2021, the protest sit-in by the Baluch people of Gwadar proved a turning point in his politics, however. He ultimately turned from a vocal leader into a hardline Baluch nationalist whose politics now borders on militancy and separatism. This was rooted in his frustration with the Pakistani establishment and resulted in his facing sedition charges. Whether he embraces full-fledged militancy will likely depend on whether the Gwadar protesters' demands are accepted and whether Mastikhan is released from prison through the due process of law.

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Notes

[1] The last name is also written as Musti Khan.

Who is Muslim Khan and Why Does the Pakistani Taliban Demand his Release?

Zia Ur Rehman

Brokered by the Afghan Taliban's interior minister and Haqqani Network leader, Sirajudin Haqqani, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban, agreed with the Pakistani government on November 9, 2021 to a "month-long complete ceasefire" ([BBC Urdu](#), November 6). As part of the agreement, Islamabad would free four TTP leaders, including Muslim Khan, the former regional spokesperson for the group in Swat valley. With Khan's release from Pakistani prison in the first phase of the ceasefire's implementation as a goodwill gesture, Pakistan would encourage TTP militants to continue negotiations to end the years-long conflict in the country ([The News](#), November 6).

A tall well-built man with long hair and a salt and pepper-colored beard, Khan was the TTP's head spokesperson for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Swat district. The Pakistani military on September 11, 2009, however, arrested Khan along with other senior commanders in an operation on the outskirts of Mingora, the headquarters of Swat valley. The government had placed a 10-million rupee (\$57,000) reward for his capture — dead or alive ([Inter-Services Public Relations](#), September 11, 2009). Media reports citing TTP leaders suggested Khan and his accomplices were arrested while taking part in peace talks with military authorities in Islamabad under the auspices of a safety guarantee from a resident of Swat who had settled in the United States ([BBC Urdu](#), September 11, 2009). Whatever the case, Khan

proved to be a pivotal figure in the failure of the ceasefire.

For Islamabad, the ceasefire was intended to be a month long respite from terrorist attacks carried out by the TTP. However, Pakistani authorities in the end only released low-profile members of the TTP, but did not release Muslim Khan or three other leaders who were on the list presented by the TTP to the Pakistani government ([The News](#), December 9). Because of this, the TTP central leader, Mufti Noor Wali, on December 9, 2021 announced an end the ceasefire and accused the Pakistani authorities of renegeing on promises made in the initial stages of the peace talks. Soon after, the TTP resumed attacks on Pakistani security and law enforcement personnel ([Dawn](#), December 10).

In January, Islamabad sent a delegation of Pakistani tribal elders to Afghanistan to revive talks with the TTP ([The Nation](#), January 18). However, the TTP leadership refused to resume talks if Khan would not be released, among the three other TTP leaders. [1] Khan was evidently vital to peace between the TTP and Pakistan and was highly regarded by the TPP leadership.

Muslim Khan's Background

Muslim Khan was born in Koza Banda village in the Swat Valley in August of 1954. He received his early education in his village and attended further studies at the Government Graduate Jahanzeb College in Mingora. Khan was at this time a student activist of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), a left-leaning political party, in the 1970s. He was also imprisoned for 25 days for participation in violent agitation ([BBC Urdu](#), October 18, 2008). Later, talking to the journalists in Swat valley in mid-2008, Khan expressed his repentance and said that during his youth he did not understand politics. [3]

In the early 1980s, Khan joined the Pakistan National Shipping Corporation, the country's national flag carrier, as a

seaman, and visited Europe and many other countries during his tenure ([Dawn](#), September 12, 2009). After working for two years as a seaman, Khan went to Kuwait to work for a transport company. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, he returned to Pakistan and set up his own medicine shop in his native town. In 1998, he went to the United States, where he worked as a house painter. In an interview with CNN, Khan said that he spent four years living in Boston, Massachusetts ([CNN](#), May 14, 2009). Because of his overseas experience, he is fluent in English, Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, besides his mother tongue Pashto ([BBC Urdu](#), October 18, 2008).

Khan underwent an ideological transformation from left-leaning politics to radical Islam in the early 1990s when he fell under the influence of Maulana Sufi Muhammad, who had founded Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat- e-Mohammadi (TNSM), which was a pre-Taliban Islamist movement in his Swat district that called for the implementation of sharia ([Terrorism Monitor](#), January 20, 2011; [BBC Urdu](#), October 18, 2008). However, he abandoned the TNSM after criticizing the group for adopting a softer approach for the cause of advancing Islam. [4]

Becoming the Public Face of the Pakistani Taliban in Swat

Maulana Fazlullah, a militant commander who became the TTP's top leader in 2014, originally announced the launch of the violent insurgency in the picturesque Swat valley of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (then North West Frontier Province) in July 2007. The insurgency later became defined by the TTP in December 2007 after the merging of more than two dozen militant groups operating in the region ([Dawn](#), September 7, 2013). Although Khan was associated with Fazlullah since 2006, he only rose to prominence after assuming the position of TTP spokesman for the Swat valley in April 2008.

Within a few weeks, Khan became the public face of the mini-Taliban state in the Swat valley by acknowledging responsibility for the slaughter and murder of a large number of innocent civilians and countless law enforcement personnel on mainstream TV channels. [1] Because of his lack of formal education and aversion to the media, Fazlullah assigned Khan to manage the TTP's publicity. [2] One month after Khan's appointment, however, he found himself at the center of a major political development in Pakistan when he headed a TTP committee to negotiate with the Swat provincial government and struck a peace deal with it after it promised to implement sharia law in the valley. Khan was also one of the five signatories of that agreement on behalf of the TTP ([BBC Urdu](#), May 21, 2008).

Although the peace deal failed within weeks after TTP militants continued their activities and blew up dozens of government buildings, especially schools, Khan came into the spotlight because of media attention surrounding the TTP-government talks ([BBC Urdu](#), June 17, 2008). After the launching of a decisive military operation in 2009, the TTP Swat chapter was uprooted from Swat and other neighboring districts by the Pakistani military.

Becoming the "Butcher of Swat"

As the spokesman of the TTP Swat faction during the group's reign in the region from 2007 to 2009, Khan could be seen on television justifying brutal attacks and accepting responsibility for them, including beheadings, suicide bombings, and the destruction of schools. It earned him and Fazlullah the title "butchers of Swat" ([ARY News](#), December 30, 2016). Khan, for example, claimed responsibility for blowing up at least 250 schools in the Swat valley because he believed that those schools impart "Western education" to children ([DW Urdu](#), September 11, 2009). He also directed the cable operators only to show news and Islamic channels while other entertainment programs would be banned ([Dawn](#), March 30, 2009).

Khan also offered Osama Bin Laden and other militants a safe haven in Swat district if they wanted to settle there ([Dawn](#), April 21, 2009). Further, he acknowledged that the militants of his group publicly flogged a 17-year-old girl for allegedly having an illicit relationship with a married man. Beyond that, he defended the Taliban's right to whip women shoppers who were improperly dressed ([Dawn](#), April 3, 2009). As a result of these claims, in August 2009, the TTP central leadership finally appointed Khan as the group's central spokesman temporarily after the arrest of the group's then spokesman, Maulvi Umar, in a military operation in Mohmand district ([BBC](#), August 19, 2009).

After Khan's own arrest in 2009, there was little heard from him for many years. Finally, in December 2016 the Pakistani military announced that Khan was among eight "terrorists" whose impending death penalty was confirmed by army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa ([Dunya News](#), December 28, 2016). The charges against Khan were that he was involved in killing innocent civilians and attacking armed forces and law enforcement agencies, which resulted in the deaths of 31 persons and injuries to 69 others. The military also said that he was involved in the killing of two Chinese telecommunication engineers who were kidnapped from Lower Dir district in 2008 and whose release Khan had initially offered in exchange for 136 jailed militants ([Dawn](#), September 30, 2008).

Conclusion

In May 2017, Nida Bibi, Khan's wife, approached the province's higher court about the military's court decision to give him the death sentence. She appealed to the court to provide an opportunity for a fair trial for her husband according to the country's constitution ([Dawn](#), May 29, 2017). In contrast, military court trials are held in secret, and prisoners on trial are kept in military-run internment centers away from the mainstream jail population. [5] However, the Pakistani military claimed that Khan had admitted his guilt before the

magistrate as well as to the trial court ([Dawn](#), May 29, 2017).

This was not the first time the TTP had demanded Khan's release, however. In February 2013, the TTP entered negotiations with the Pakistani government conditional on the release of Khan, along with four other leaders. Ehsanullah Ehsan, the TTP's spokesperson at the time, stated that Khan's release was a necessary confidence-building measure because he would participate in the talks with the government ([Express Tribune](#), February 3, 2013).

Until mid-2020, the TTP seemed considerably weakened, with the top leadership killed or forced into Afghanistan after the military's counter-terrorism operations of 2014. Of late, however, the group has been reinvigorated and alongside the Taliban's takeover of neighboring Afghanistan, the TTP has made a comeback, stepping up its attacks in Pakistan on military personnel and policemen, particularly including those assigned to guard polio vaccinators ([Voice of America Urdu](#), January 10). In addition, after capturing Kabul on August 15, 2021, the Taliban has released a large number of TTP militants from Afghan prisons, including former deputy chief Maulvi Faqir Muhammad ([Samaa](#), Aug 16, 2021).

With a reinvigorated TTP stepping up its attacks, it has again began pressuring Islamabad to release Muslim Khan and hand him over to the group's leaders currently based in Afghanistan's provinces of Kunar and Khost. Khan's skills in dealing with the media, his command over several languages, and particularly English, and experience working abroad make him an important leader and unique talent for the TTP, whose leaders and militants are sometimes illiterate and graduates of religious seminaries. However, it seems Islamabad is not ready to release any of the TTP's top leaders, especially Khan.

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Notes:

[1] Telephone interview with a religious scholar in South Waziristan who is familiar with the TTP's ongoing talks, February 13, 2022.

[2] Telephonic interview with a journalist from Swat valley, February 13, 2022.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Telephone interview with an official of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, February 11, 2022.

The New Caliph of IS: the Winding Career of Bashar Khattab Ghazal al-Sumaida

Daniele Garofalo

Two months after a U.S. special operation on March 10 in Atmeh, Syria, al-Furqan Foundation, which disseminates Islamic State (IS) messages from the organization's central leadership, released an announcement through the new spokesman Abu Umar al-Muhajir ([Jihadology](#), March 10). In the twelve minute audio clip, the death of the previous leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi was acknowledged. The name of his successor was declared as Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi ([Akhbaralaan, Syria.Tv](#), March 10).

IS did not show the face or reveal the birth name of the new leader "for security reasons." [1] As a result, to outline his profile and identity, one must rely on local sources, contacts, and interviews with

former jihadists and current jihadists in Syria and Iraq and the monitoring of jihadist media channels. [2] This profile intends to provide additional details regarding his identity beyond what has circulated in recent weeks ([New Lines Magazine](#), February 16).

Who is the New Leader of IS?

The birth name of the new IS “caliph” is believed to be Bashar Khattab Ghazal al-Sumaida'i, who is also known as Haji Zaid, Abu Khattab al-Iraqi, or Abu al-Moez al-Iraqi. However, the name of Abubakar al-Baghdadi's brother was also circulated as his possible birth name ([Cairo24](#), [Lebanon24](#), [Enabbaladi](#), 12/03/2022). Several sources denied the latter possibility, however, noting “Their information is incorrect. The brother of al-Baghdadi has held important positions but in small areas. He is not a high-ranking official and has no important history with the group. Al-Sumaida’i is a descendant of the Quraysh, has great legal knowledge, is a veteran, and was recommended by the previous Caliph.” [3]

Al-Sumaida’i is an Iraqi belonging to the Sumaida'i tribe, which is concentrated northwest of Ramadi, Iraq, and traces its ancestry directly to the Prophet Muhammad. He was a member of the Ba’ath party, but left shortly before the outbreak of the Second Gulf War to join Ansar al-Islam (AAI) [4] in Iraqi Kurdistan. At the time then led by Mullah Krekar. [5] He distinguished himself by becoming an important member and after the split of AAI and the eventual rise of IS, al-Sumaida’i joined IS’s predecessor, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), in 2013.

Beginning in June 2014, al-Sumaida’i quickly climbed the ranks within ISIS, becoming a prominent jihadist preacher after coming into direct contact with Abubakar al-Baghdadi. Shortly thereafter, al-Sumaida’i was appointed by al-Baghdadi deputy Abu Muslim al-Turkmani as the head of the Court of Justice and Claims of the city of Mosul. Later he was ISIS’ chief

judge in Nineveh, where he specialized in murder and capital punishment cases. He issued numerous death sentences in the first year and a half of IS control over Mosul and was in close contact with Abu Muslim al-Turkmani and al-Baghdadi’s successor, whose birth name was Abdullah Qardash. [6] While in office, he made exceptions in several convictions of his close affiliates and subordinates, which became a scandal and resulted in his transfer to the Sharia Institute in al-Raqqa, Syria.

Al-Sumaida’i later moved closer to the extremist ideas of the Hazimiyya movement, which led to a split within IS and accusations of sedition against the Hazimiyya. [7] Between 2016 and 2017, the internal confrontation grew stronger, and al-Sumaida’i, while not publicly participating in Hazimiyya activities, “sided with them, not in delegitimizing al-Baghdadi, but in the need to review [al-Baghdadi’s] actions. He disagreed with him on the marginalization of the Hazimiyya movement...just as he disagreed with him on administrative issues in the fight against the SDF”. Because of this stance, “al-Baghdadi marginalized him.” [8] Later, “between 2018 and 2019 in [IS] areas in eastern Syria there were more disputes between the ideological currents, after which Haji Zaid and other members, including those belonging to the Delegate Committee, moved to areas controlled either by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) or Turkey.” [9] Al-Sumaida’i himself was among those Hazimiyya movement members who moved to Turkey.

Bridging Ideological Divides

After the death of al-Baghdadi in late October 2019, Abdullah Qardash asked al-Sumaida’i to return to Syria after two years in Turkey. He was then appointed a member of the Delegate Committee in 2020 and a member of the Sharia Council. In 2021, al-Sumaida’I was tasked with revitalizing IS and reorganizing the leadership, including working closely with Qardash, or “Caliph Abu Ibrahim” as he was known. In February 2022, several days

after the death of Qardash, al-Sumaida'i was appointed leader of IS, as per the recommendation of Qardash while he was still alive. Al-Sumaida'i currently "lives and runs the organization from Syria." [10]

Despite his extremist tendencies and proximity to Hazimiyya ideas, the choice not to openly or actively support that ideological current allowed al-Sumaida'i to regain an important role within IS at the behest of Qardash. The choice of IS to moderate its ideology through the appointment of al-Sumaida'i could be due to the fact that IS is trying to enhance ties with the population, clans, and tribes, which will help them escape counter-terrorism operations as well as physically control territory. It is likely, given his close relations with the late Qardash, that al-Sumaida'i will continue to expand the already well-practiced strategies of IS's "war of attrition." This involves "economic warfare", which significantly increased under Qardash's leadership in 2020-2021 ([Jihad Analytics](#), December 10, 2021). Furthermore, al-Sumaida'i will be in favor of fighting al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups not aligned with IS using both IS propaganda and operations in the theaters in which they operate.

The non-disclosure of the real identity of al-Sumaida'i by IS persuaded many academics, researchers, and journalists that the group was having operational, management and media difficulties. This supported the idea that many IS provinces might hesitate or refuse to swear allegiance to the new leader. However, this was quickly disproved by the start of a strong propaganda wave on day after the ascension of al-Sumaida'i to the Caliph position on March 11. At that time, IS began disseminating numerous photo and video packages in its official media from all the provinces that are still active (currently twelve provinces, but the campaign is still ongoing; in 2019 the propaganda campaign lasted 27 days when Qardash became leader).

Conclusion

The campaign of pledging allegiance to al-Sumaida'i has been impressive so far and could be the reason for the low pace in IS claims before the announcement. The photos and videos of fighters swearing allegiance to the new leader are of very high quality and show some provinces, such as in Iraq, Syria, West Africa (Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Khurasan [Afghanistan], with massive numbers of well-armed militants ([Telegram](#), March 16). These new oaths of allegiance and the renewed organizational structure and ambition of IS under al-Sumaida'i and the beginning of Ramadan in April may lead to a notable increase in attacks by all the provinces of IS.

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Notes

[1] Motivations are reiterated in issue 330 of the weekly al-Naba ([Jihadology](#), March 17; [Twitter.com/Minaallami](#), March 18).

[2] All of the author's interviews with rebels, militants and former jihadists were conducted on Messenger, Twitter, Telegram and Rocket Chat. All interviewees, except those mentioned in the following notes, strictly requested to remain anonymous.

[3] Interview with Saleh al-Hamewi, March 13, 2022. As a young Syrian political activist, he was arrested by the Syrian government and spent five years in Sednaya prison. He later joined the Syrian revolution and was the first founder of Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as the head of appointments for all sector leaders in Syria, except Aleppo and Idlib. He was

responsible for the relationships, unions, and mergers of many factions in the Syrian rebel scene, and left the group after the arrival of Abu Muhammed al-Julani. Today he is a researcher.

The information provided by al-Hamewi about Bashar Khattab has been confirmed by all interviewees, including Syrian rebels and former Syrian and Iraqi jihadists (all asked to remain anonymous), as well as by the author's sources and contacts on the ground.

[4] The U.S. government designated AAI as a foreign terrorist organization in 2004 because of its "close ties to and support of al-Qaeda." AAI initially trained in al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan and provided a safe haven in Iraq for al-Qaeda leaders fleeing the country after the 2003 U.S. invasion. Part of the group pledged allegiance to ISIS between 2013 and 2014, but another faction within AAI continued to fight in Syria.

[5] Author's interview with Saleh al-Hamewi.

[6] Interview with an Iraqi jihadist no longer active in IS on Telegram, who strongly requested to remain anonymous.

[7] For a detailed understanding of the extremist phenomenon within the Islamic State, see: Tore Hamming, "The Extremist Wing of the Islamic State", *Jihadica*, June 9, 2016 and Tore Hamming, "Al-Hazimiyya: The ideological conflict destroying the Islamic State from within," ICCT, May 2021.

[8] Author's interview with Saleh al-Hamewi. The words reported by al-Hamewi were confirmed by other interviews conducted on Telegram with former jihadists, particularly Syrians.

[9] Interview with a Syrian militant who asked to remain anonymous.

[10] Information received from the author's Syrian sources.