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Boko Haram Pledges Loyalty to Mysterious New Leader: Abu Umaimata

Jacob Zenn

Since the announcement of the death of Abubakar Shekau in May 2021, Boko Haram has been on the precipice of unraveling. Whereas Shekau had attempted to expand Boko Haram influence into northwestern Nigeria before his death, since his death it has been rivals, such as al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansaru and Islamic State (IS)-affiliated Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP), which have been most active in northwestern and central Nigeria. In fact, since Shekau's death Boko Haram, whose formal name is Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad (Sunni Muslim Group for Preaching and Jihad), has been losing its base in Sambisa Forest, Borno State and is only now consolidating around Lake Chad under the group's new leader, Abu Umaimata.

Abu Umaimata was announced as Boko Haram's leader on May 2 in a video showing several hundred armed Boko Haram fighters in a forested area ([Telegram](#), May

2). The commander at the front of the contingent then declared their loyalty to Abu Umaimata in an Arabic-language statement. Typical of Boko Haram videos during the Shekau era, the fighters wore rag-tag clothing and gathered around in an unsynchronized fashion. In contrast, ISWAP, owing to its media coordination with IS, tends to feature fighters in well-choreographed scenes and professional uniforms.

Ten days later, on May 12, another video from "Islamic State to Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad" was released. In the video, the fighters, again in rag-tag clothing but still heavily armed, reconfirmed their loyalty to Abu Umaimata. They spoke in multiple languages from the Lake Chad region, including Buduma, Kanuri and related Kanembu, and Arabic, which indicated they were likely filming around Lake Chad ([Telegram](#), May 12). The mention of "Islamic State" in that video's title was also a continuation of the Shekau era when the group, despite having been expelled from IS in 2016, still considered itself the rightful IS representative in West Africa, and not ISWAP.

Prior to Abu Umaimata, Bakura Doro and Bakura Sahalaba were believed to be the Boko Haram commanders who succeeded Shekau after Shekau's death by self-inflicted suicide bombing during an ISWAP offensive to kill him (punch.ng, June 17). It is unclear whether reports of one or both of the Bakuras' deaths in battle with ISWAP or with the Nigerian or neighboring countries' are true, or even whether "Abu Umaimata" is a pseudonym for one of the Bakuras (dailytrust.com, May 24). However, the fact that the Bakuras are based around Lake Chad combined with Abu Umaimata's de facto position as Shekau's successor represents a commonality between what is known about the Bakuras and Abu Umaimata ([Twitter/@VincentFoucher](https://twitter.com/VincentFoucher), May 12).

Whatever the case of his true identity, Abu Umaimata will lead a Boko Haram that can contest ISWAP around Lake Chad and may have a chance at a resurgence in Sambisa Forest. The fact that Boko Haram now has a confirmed leader may also serve as a unifying force for the group, including fighters in Sambisa Forest who were considering defecting to ISWAP or surrendering to the Nigerian army. Indeed, on May 23, Boko Haram fighters reportedly clashed with ISWAP in Sambisa Forest for the first time since Shekau's death, killing several ISWAP soldiers ([Twitter/@ZagazolaMakama](https://twitter.com/ZagazolaMakama), May 23).

Abu Umaimata may also have opportunities to revive Boko Haram in northwestern Nigeria where it left off before Shekau died. Locals in that region are reporting Boko Haram operating alongside Ansaru (tribuneonline.ng.com, May 14). If their assertions are accurate, the lack of the ruthless Shekau, who had historically ordered assassinations of Ansaru leaders, may have allowed for a thaw in Boko Haram-Ansaru relations in northwestern Nigeria.

At the same time, Abu Umaimata will be facing continued pressure around Lake Chad. For example, on May 26, Niger's army claimed it killed 40 Boko Haram

soldiers around Lake Chad (tv5monde.com, May 26). The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which comprises Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon around Lake Chad, has claimed the killing of more than 300 Boko Haram members in recent weeks (ripplesnigeria.com, May 15). If Abu Umaimata is seeking to restore Boko Haram to its heyday during the reign of Shekau, he will have to counter the MNJTF and other armies around Lake Chad as well as ISWAP. He will also have to become a charismatic leader like Shekau, and not remain the pseudonymous and mysterious leader that he has been thus far.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Re-Assessing the Death and Legacy of Abu Musab al-Suri

By Daniele Garofalo

In 2022, attention has returned to the important jihadist theorist, ideologue, and strategist, Abu Musab al-Suri, due to an article published by Syrian journalist, Hossam Jazmati, in February (SyriaTv, February 28). Citing personal sources, Jazmati reported that al-Suri died in 2011 and that he was executed by Bashar al-Assad's regime while he was a prisoner. The publication of Jazmati's article rekindled interest in al-Suri, and especially the debate about his writings and legacy. However, there is still no incontrovertible evidence of whether he is alive or, as Jazmati claims, dead.

Al-Suri: Dead or Alive?

Abu Musab al-Suri's life has been described and outlined by several researchers and journalists (Terrorism Monitor, July, 7; al-Arabiya, March 1, 2006; Aljummhuriya, November 13, 2013). However, what remains most obscure about him is his imprisonment and reported, albeit

unconfirmed, death. In Jazmati's article, eyewitnesses alleged that the Syrian-born jihadist leader was executed in 2011 at the beginning of the Syrian revolution. A similar opinion was expressed by another Syrian journalist, Majed Abdel Nour, of Thiqa News Agency, who claimed that al-Suri was executed by the regime in Sednaya prison eight years ago (thus in 2014). [1] Researchers and experts Aymen al-Tamimi, Tam Hussein, and Mina al-Lami, among others, also believe that al-Suri is probably deceased. [2]

Interviews with Syrian sources on the ground, including current and former jihadist and Syrian rebels, provide other versions of al-Suri's fate. One of the first sources [3], who had direct contact with people close to Abu Musab al-Suri including Abu Khaled al-Suri, [4] asserted that Abu Musab al-Suri was arrested in late 2004. Until 2014, he was alive and in the company of Raid215. This is one of the main prisons of the al-Assad regime under the direct direction of military intelligence but was founded as early as 1969 under the supervision of Hafez al-Assad when he was Minister of Defence. Branch 215 in Kafr Sousa, Damascus is also where released prisoners have stated that torture and executions are carried out daily; hence it is known as the "Death Branch." ([Al-Jazeera](#), March 10, 2021; [Syrian Observer](#), January 10, 2020).

As of 2018, al-Suri was also seemingly alive because news about him kept emerging from prisoners who were released until then. [5] However, the new prisoners released since 2018 have not known anything about al-Suri because he was in solitary confinement and was forbidden to mix with other prisoners after that time. Muzmjier al-Sham, whose is described as "a voice from the Sham [Syria] from within the jihadist mainstream" likewise asserted that "There are always rumors about the killing of Abu Musab without reliable news. No confirmation in jihadist circles. For me, Abu Musab is alive." [6]

Nevertheless, over the years, one of the reasons raised as a cause for Abu Musab al-Suri's death was that the Syrian regime had tortured him, but after the initial torture, he was treated with respect and provided with everything he needed. [7] However, several local sources confirmed that al-Assad had been negotiating with different actors, including Jabhat al-Nusra, for the release of al-Suri ([Aawasat](#), September 3, 2014; [AlMayadeen](#), September 2, 2014). [8 & 9] According to a commander of Syrian rebel forces, Al-Farouq Abu Bakr, several exchanges were conducted with the al-Assad regime, which resulted in the release of many women, children, and young people who were in the prisons, and, in 2017, al-Suri's name came up. However, the number of hostages that the al-Assad regime's representatives demanded to be exchanged for al-Suri was too large and the rebels rejected the proposal. [10] Al-Farouq Abu Bakr also stated that he was contacted by an al-Assad regime negotiator in March 2022, who reiterated that al-Suri was still alive and that the al-Assad regime could still exchange him for prisoners.

Conclusion: What is Al-Suri's Legacy?

There is no doubt that the theoretical and strategic ideology developed by Abu Musab al-Suri influenced post-9/11 al-Qaeda strategy ([Egyptian Institute for Studies](#), Semptember 26, 2019). His vision was to transform al-Qaeda from a hierarchical and highly vulnerable organization into a decentralized and resilient movement, which is essentially the formula adopted by al-Qaeda after the collapse of the Taliban in 2001 and particularly after the rise of Aymen al-Zawahiri. Al-Suri's ideas were widely disseminated on the internet (albeit often in summaries of his enormous output) and, therefore, not only influenced the strategy of al-Qaeda, but also the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra and its successor Hayat Tahrir as-Sham (HTS), and lone actors who engaged in "Individual Jihad."

Also effective was al-Suri's critique of the Salafism of Abu Qatada al-Filistini ([AlJazeera](#), March 9, 2017). Al-Suri criticized the Salafists, including Abu Qatada's hardline views, for being too fanatical and causing infighting within the Muslim world and jihadist organizations. He saw disputes over Salafist doctrine as a security risk to the jihadist movement. Al-Suri chastised, for example, the Salafists in Afghanistan; in his view, their zeal was destructive, particularly in dealing with Taliban and non-Salafi mujahedeen.

Whether or not he is alive or dead, al-Suri's legacy is strong, alive, and enduring. His refusal to retract his writings, even at the risk of being imprisoned, made him even more important and venerated. It is probable that one of the reasons why jihadists have essentially failed up to now is precisely because they have not successfully practiced what al-Suri preached, and instead became unpopular, elitist, and marginal in their recruitment and operations.

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Notes

[1] Author's interview with Syrian journalist Majed Abdel Nour.

[2] Author's interviews with the experts mentioned.

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

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

[4] Abu Khaled al-Suri was a Syrian militant and rebel. A follower and right-hand man of Abu Musab al-Suri, he is thought to be one of the co-founders of Ahrar al-Sham. According to Saleh al-Hamawi, Abu Khaled was killed by ISIS in 2013 in Aleppo.

[5] Interview with Saleh al-Hamawi.

[6] Private interview of the author with Muzmjier al-Sham. His twitter handle is: [@MzmjerSh](#).

[7] Interviews with Saleh al-Hamawi and a Syrian Hurras al-Din (HaD) militant, who requested anonymity.

[8] Interview with Saleh al-Hamawi, who added: "I asked Abu Khaled about the reason for his release and departure from Abu Musab [al-Suri], and he told me that Abu Musab was asked to announce his retraction of the book 'The People of the Levant in the Face of the Nusayri, the Jews, and the Crusaders', in exchange for his release and him to go to the country he wanted, but he categorically refused".

[9] Interview with a Syrian source who allowed himself to be identified only as Khattab al-Shami.

[10] Interview with Al-Farouq Abu Bakr, one of the leaders and commanders of the Syrian National Rebel Army. Since 2013, he has been involved in the dossier of prisoners in the Assad regime's jails and prisoner exchanges with it.

A Profile of the Anti-India Secessionist and Pro-Khalilistan Demagogue: Gurpatwant Singh Pannu

Animesh Roul

Gurpatwant Singh Pannu, one of the founding leaders of the U.S-based pro-Khalistan separatist entity “Sikhs For Justice (SFJ),” is notorious for his incendiary speeches and threatening messages against Indian leaders and its democratic institutions. On May 10, Pannu claimed responsibility for the rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) attack at Punjab Intelligence Headquarters in Mohali, Punjab and for raising Khalistani flags at the Dharamshala Assembly complex in Himachal Pradesh. The State police named Pannu as the main accused in the Himachal Pradesh case and booked him under the stringent anti-terror Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act ([The Hindu](#), May 9; [FirstPost](#), May 11).

This is not the first time Pannu and SFJ stoked fear and challenged Indian authorities. His active engagement in anti-Indian activities came to light in August 2018 during the “Khalistan Referendum 2020” campaign rally held at London's Trafalgar square ([India Today](#), August 13, 2018). The rally, which was the first of its kind by SFJ, was organized to foment Punjabi sub-nationalism across the world and revive the subdued Khalistan homeland movement in the Indian subcontinent. [1]

During the same year, in October 2018, police in India unearthed SFJ's presence in Punjab with the arrest of several operatives who possessed “Referendum 2020” banners. In addition, they had arms and other documents related to the Khalistan separatist movement. Investigations led to the uncovering of SFJ and Pannu's informal funding networks, arms procurement channels for subversive activities, and media campaigns to incite the pro-Khalistan movement to disrupt the

territorial integrity of India ([Patiala Politics](#), November 1, 2018; [NDTV](#), October 20, 2018).

Pannu plays a direct role along with other operatives using websites and social media channels in radicalizing, funding, and inciting the youth of Punjab into committing acts of arson and violence. For example, on June 24, 2020, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) arrested Pargat Singh, an SFJ recruiter stirring up unrest amongst the Sikh youth in Punjab on the direction of Pannu. NIA investigations also noticed Pannu's hand in instigating Sikhs in the Indian Army and police to mutiny against the Indian State ([Indian Express](#), June 24, 2020; [Indian Express](#), February 11, 2021). His calls for liberating Punjab and the homeland of the Sikhs from Indian rule continue to get louder as Pannu remains a free man in the U.S. It is from this base that he chastises the Indian government and pushes his separatist agenda.

Reviving the Khalistan Movement and Appealing to Muslims

Pannu, who is officially the legal advisor for SFJ, is a designated terrorist in India under the Fourth Schedule of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 ([Tribune](#), July 3, 2020). SFJ was also listed as an “unlawful association” in July 2019 by the Indian government for attempting to revive the Sikh insurgency and Khalistan movement in India ([The Print](#), January 9, 2020). Investigating agencies in India believe that, like other pro-Khalistan groups, such as Khalistan Liberation Force (KLF), SFJ and Pannu have been operating at the behest of foreign intelligence agencies, such as Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) ([Hindustan Times](#), June 28).

Pannu often encourages his followers to install “Kesri Khalistan” flags (Saffron flag of Khalistan) at vital government installations and to shout “Khalistan Zindabad” (Free Khalistan) slogans to defy Indian authority. In the last several years,

Pannu has become active on social media, such as Twitter and YouTube, to issue audio and visual threat messages targeting Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, former Punjab chief minister Amarinder Singh, and right-wing Hindu political leaders, such as Yogi Adityanath, L K Advani, and JP Nadda of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), among others ([Outlook India](#), July 30, 2021). His diatribes were also directed toward media houses, the Delhi police, Supreme Court lawyers, and even the Karnataka High Court (HC) judges in the past ([YouTube/World Punjabi News](#), November 3, 2020).

During the height of the face veil (hijab) controversy in educational institutions of Karnataka in February, Pannu further incited Muslim sentiments against the Hindu right-wing government in India by saying "today the ban is on Hijab, tomorrow it will be Azan (call to prayer), Namaz (prayer), and then Quran ([Terrorism Monitor](#), May 6)." He then called upon Indian Muslims to start the "Hijab Referendum" to carve out a "Urduistan" (Homeland for Urdu speaking people) in the areas of West Bengal, Delhi, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where Muslims can freely practice their religious customs and beliefs ([News18.com](#), February 11). He issued a strong message to the Karnataka High Court judges not to ban the hijab and warned that there would be dire consequences if the verdict in the Supreme Court went against Muslim women's right to wear the veil. Indian intelligence agencies suspected a conspiracy between SFJ and Pakistan's ISI to fuel controversy by exploiting the existing Hindu-Muslim fault-lines in India ([India Today](#), February 12).

Anti-India Threats and Actions Early in Pannu's Career

Pannu grew up in Khankot, a village in Amritsar, Punjab. Although not much is known about his years growing up there, he pursued law as a career and became an attorney in Canada ([Amar Ujala](#) (Hindi),

September 10, 2020). He then founded SFJ in 2007 along with fellow Khalistani supporters. He kick-started a campaign in the U.S for the rights of Sikh communities in India, especially those who suffered during the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi. In 2014, Pannu and the SFJ started another campaign of filing legal cases against Indian political leaders for human rights violations, particularly atrocities committed against Sikh communities in India. SFJ's and Pannu's tirade against leaders like former prime minister Manmohan Singh, the Congress president Sonia Gandhi, the Shiromani Akali Dal president Sukhbir Singh Badal, former Punjab chief minister Amarinder Singh and the present prime minister Narendra Modi were among the most vitriolic ([Hindustan Times](#), July 20, 2016; [Business Standard](#), September 26, 2015).

SFJ and Pannu were also blamed for vandalizing Mahatma Gandhi statues in Chicago, San Francisco, and Union Square Park, New York in the U.S. ([Indian Express](#), February 5; [Republic World](#), February 8). Further, in March, SFJ and Pannu urged the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to add a Sikh contingent as part of the international legion of foreign fighters to defend Ukraine against Russia. He also added that this was an opportunity for Sikh people to liberate Punjab by joining an Anti-India block at the international level and critiquing India's Russia-leaning stance in the Russia-Ukraine war ([Twitter/@fizz.doeramii](#), March 2).

Evading Indian Intelligence and Plans for Separation

Even though Pannu regularly issues threats, which are mostly pre-recorded phone calls, Indian agencies had been unable to successfully track the origin and channels he used until early April. Delhi police investigations have, however, found that Pannu uses a U.S telecom service provider for making threat calls to the lawyers in the Supreme Court ([Indian Express](#), April 6). From this base, besides Punjab state, which remains at the center

of the Khalistan separatist movement, Pannu and SFJ also plan to merge neighbouring territories containing parts of the Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh states into the Khalistan homeland. On July 30, 2021, Pannu and his team made these intentions clear with several threatening calls to journalists from different telecom numbers in the U.S and Britain. The message was about “liberating Punjab” and taking over all parts of Himachal Pradesh, which were once parts of Punjab province ([Outlook India](#), July 30, 2021). Similarly, under the “Khalistan plan,” Pannu threatened to take over western areas in Uttar Pradesh from Saharanpur to Rampur and incorporate them into Khalistan ([Times of India](#), August 6, 2021).

Further, to carve out an independent Khalistan, Pannu, in another recent call, maintained that Haryana would become part of Punjab and Punjab would be liberated from India soon. He asserted that “on April 29 [2022], the flag of Khalistan will be hoisted at every district collector and superintendent of police offices from Gurugram to Ambala ([Firstpost](#), April 16). [2] The threatening calls from Pannu prompted Gurgrams Cyber Crime police to register sedition charges for Pannu under various sections of the Indian Penal Code and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

As threatened by Pannu and SFJ, several places in Punjab, especially Patiala, witnessed violent clashes between armed Pro-Khalistan supporters and Hindu right-wing activists. ([Twitter](#)/ ANI, May 1). Also, on April 29, the Khalistani flag was reportedly hoisted outside Deputy Commissioner’s office in Malerkotla, Punjab and outside the Superintendent of Police’s residence in Kurukshetra, Haryana. ([Jagran](#), (Hindi), April 30; [Tribune](#), April 30). Later, Pannu took responsibility for these incidents. [3]

Conclusion

Thus far, SFJ and Pannu have not succeeded in inciting Sikh youths to anti-India activities in a significant way, except for instigating widespread violence on January 26, 2020 during a tractor parade by farmers protesting against central farm laws. They have only managed to lure fringe elements to cause disturbances and vandalism in Punjab and elsewhere. Additionally, they have mobilized the Sikh diaspora for demonstrations and actions against the Indian state. However, at the same time India’s anti-terror agency, the National Investigation Agency (NIA), registered an uptick in cases related to the Khalistan movement in India. Fear of any immediate revival of Khalistani terrorism remains somewhat remote. Nonetheless, Pannu’s provocative speeches and his network’s constant social media diatribes against the Indian government and institutions from safe havens in the U.S, Canada and other European countries remain a matter of concern in Indian security circles.

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Notes

[1] The Khalistan movement is a violent secessionist movement that started during the early 1970s and demanded a separate homeland for Sikh people in Punjab, India). Between 1985 and 1991, pro-Khalistan terrorist groups perpetrated several high casualty operations, including the Baddawal train massacre of June 1991 and the Air India flight 182 (Kanishka) bombing in June 1985. For a comprehensive study of the Khalistan movement, read Terry Milewski *Blood for Blood: Fifty Years of the Global Khalistan Project*, Harper Collins, 2021.

[2] For all Khalistan supporters worldwide, April 29 is Khalistan Day. On this day in 1986, a group of Sikh separatists at the Akal Takht (Sikh Seat of power at the Golden Temple at Amritsar) declared an independent state of Khalistan that effectively started decades-long Khalistan terrorism in India.

[3] "Messages from Sikhs for Justice to Punjab Police", YouTube, May 2, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IzqzW5vxvuc&t=8s>.

Another Pakistani Taliban Leader Falls to Assassination: The Mysterious Killing of Abdul Wahab Larik

By Zia Ur Rehman

On March 22, Abdul Wahab Larik, a central leader of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) who was appointed the group's head in the southern Pakistani province of Sindh, was killed by unidentified gunmen in Afghanistan's Kandahar province ([Dawn](#), March 25). Larik's killing is a major blow to the TTP and sectarian militancy in the Pakistan, particularly in northern Sindh [1]. However, his killing has also renewed the debate over who is behind the continuous killings of TTP leaders in Afghanistan, a country that has been governed by the Afghan Taliban, the TTP's ideological ally, since August 15. [2] Although the killers are unknown, Pakistan has been benefiting from the assassinations, especially in the wake of an increase in TTP attacks inside Pakistan from their sanctuaries in Afghanistan ([Voice of America Urdu](#), January 31).

Who was Larik?

Born on May 2, 1970, Larik was popularly known by his nom de guerre, Maulvi Khush Muhammad Sindhi, in jihadist circles of Pakistan and Afghanistan. According to Sindh's Counter-Terrorism Department

Red Book, which is a publication listing details on militants, Larik was born in Khanpur town in Sindh province's Shikarpur district. [3] Fluent in Urdu, Sindhi, Pashto, and Arabic languages, Larik also used the aliases of Hakim Ali Jan and Khush Muhammad, according to the Red Book. A media report, however, suggests that he was also using the aliases of Gypsy Kandahar and Hakeem Saleh ([Express Tribune](#), March 25).

After studying at local madrassas (religious schools) in Shikarpur, Larik entered the world of jihad by joining the Harakat ul-Jihad-e-Islami (HuJI) in the early 2000s. This was an al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban-linked Pakistani jihadist group that focused on conducting attacks in Afghanistan and India-administrated Kashmir. According to the Red Book, Larik had served as Sindh province head for the HuJI and trained in Afghanistan in the 2000s.

However, after the HuJI were weakened following the arrests and deaths of several leaders, Larik joined Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) between 2007-2008 ([Dawn](#), July 27, 2014). This proscribed militant group aims to transform Pakistan into a Sunni Muslim state primarily through violent attacks on the Shia community. [4] Larik remained close to one of LeJ's key leaders, Usman Saifullah Kurd, after the terror group split over the leadership issue. However, after the killing of Kurd in February 2015, Larik became the head of the LeJ faction that Kurd had formed.

A senior law enforcement official stated that it is not clear whether Larik had collaborated with Abdul Hafeez Pandrani, another most wanted militant commander from Shikarpur, who was previously associated with the LeJ and carried out terror attacks in Sindh province's northern districts. [5] Pandrani later served as the Sindh provincial chief of Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) at the time of his killing in a police shootout in February 2019 in Baluchistan province ([Geo](#), March 1, 2019).

Larik was reportedly involved in multiple terror attacks, mainly in Sindh and Baluchistan provinces. He had masterminded the January 2015 suicide attack on a Shia mosque in the Shikarpur district that killed 53 worshippers ([Ary News](#), March 24). He had also allegedly masterminded the August 2014 attacks on the Sumangli airbases of the Pakistani Air Force, located in Quetta, the provincial capital of Baluchistan ([Express Tribune](#), March 25). Further, Larik was also involved in a number of sectarian killings, including the 2014 attack on Imambargah Yasrab in Karachi's D.H.A area, and the killings of Shia clerics in the city. [6]

Mysterious Circumstances Surrounding Larik's Killing

In mid-2020, when TTP leader Mufti Noor Wali renewed efforts to reunify breakaway factions under al-Qaeda's supervision, he surprised observers and law enforcement agencies by announcing that a string of influential jihadist commanders had rejoined the ranks of the TTP. In August 2020, Umar Media, the TTP's media wing, announced that Larik had also merged his faction of the LeJ with the TTP by pledging loyalty to Wali ([Terrorism Monitor](#), January 25, 2021).

Within months of Larik's joining the TTP, the TTP leadership began employing Larik to reinforce its operational capacity. He was later appointed as the group's Sindh head because of his experience. [9] Pakistani Counter-terrorism Department officials believe that he had begun planning suicide attacks in Karachi before his death ([Dawn](#), March 25). Following Larik's killing, Karachi Police made several arrests of TTP militants lying low in the city to carry out attacks ([Express Tribune](#), April 2).

Larik's killing was also a major blow to the TTP and its allied sectarian groups that are trying to gain a foothold in Sindh. No one has claimed responsibility for Larik's killing, while the TTP and Afghan Taliban have not issued any statement on his death. Larik's death in Afghanistan, however, has

reignited the debate over who is behind the killings of the TTP leaders in Afghanistan.

Operation Zarb-e-Azb, a military action launched in 2014 against militant groups operating in Pakistan's tribal areas, had forced the TTP and other militant groups to shift their hideouts to neighboring provinces in Afghanistan. From there, they have planned and executed attacks in Pakistan across the border ([Pakistan Forward](#), July 10, 2020). The motives behind the assassination of a key TTP leader are significant, as talks between the Pakistani government and the TTP mediated by the Afghan Taliban are underway.

Conclusion

Besides Larik, other key TTP leaders have been killed in Afghanistan:

- In January, the TTP's former spokesperson, Mufti Muhammad Balti, known by his nom de guerre Muhamamd Khurasani, was mysteriously killed near the Pakistan-Afghan border in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province ([Voice of America Urdu](#), January 11).
- In the same month, the TTP commander and shadow governor for the Malakand region, Mufti Burjan, was also killed in an attack ([Ary News](#), February 5).
- Also in the same month, Mangal Bagh, the head of the banned Lashkar-e-Islam, a militant group that is active in the Khyber tribal district, was also killed in a remote-controlled bomb blast in Nangarhar province, Afghanistan ([Voice of America Urdu](#), January 28, 2021).
- In December 2021, TTP founder Maulvi Faqir Muhammad narrowly escaped a missile attack at his house near the Pakistani border in Kunar province, Afghanistan ([The Friday Times](#), December 18, 2021).

After the continuing attacks on TTP leaders in Afghanistan, now including Larik, the

TTP in March directed its leaders and members in Afghanistan to take precautionary measures. Meanwhile, after failing to convince the Afghan Taliban to eliminate the TTP's sanctuaries in Afghanistan, Pakistan on April 17 conducted airstrikes to target TTP hideouts in Khost and Kunar province of Afghanistan, killing dozens of people ([Gandhara](#), April 21). The inability or failure of Afghanistan's Taliban rulers to protect the TTP from attacks could force some of the latter's leaders to form an alliance with the Taliban's archenemy, ISKP, which would pose a series challenge both to the Afghan Taliban and Islamabad.

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Notes

[1] In-person interview with an official of Sindh Police' Counter-Terrorism Department in Karachi, April 27, 2022.

[2] Telephonic Interview with a TTP leader in Kunar province, April 23, 2022.

[3] Red Book 2021, compiled by the Sindh Police Counter-Terrorism Department, page 73; In-person interview with an official of the Sindh Police' Counter-Terrorism Department in Karachi, April 27, 2022.

[4] Telephonic Interview with a TTP's leader in Kunar province, April 23, 2022.

[5] In-person interview with an official of the Sindh Police' Counter-Terrorism Department in Karachi, April 27, 2022.

[6] Red Book 2021, compiled by the Sindh Police Counter-Terrorism Department, Page 73.