



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

p.1

Brief

Jacob Zenn

p.2

The Rise of Filipino
New People's Army
Propagandist Ka Juanito
Magbanua

Lucas Webber

p.4

A Profile of Bashir Zaib:
The Radical Leader of the
Baluch Liberation Army
in Pakistan

Kiyya Baloch

p.6

Zhasulan Dyuisembin:
An In-Depth Look at a
Kazakh Foreign Fighter's
Journey to the Ukrainian
Army

Nurbek Bekmurzaev

VOLUME XIII, ISSUE 9 | September 2022

Peruvian Communist Rebel Leader "Jose" Palomino on Brink of Capture in VRAEM

Jacob Zenn

In August, the Peruvian armed forces launched an operation targeting the base of former Shining Path commander, Victor Quispe Palomino, whose alias is "Jose." As the Shining Path is now centered in Valle de los Ríos Apurímac, Ene, y Mantaro (Valley of the Apurimac Rivers), or VRAEM, the operation to target Palomino was also primarily being carried out in VRAEM. Palomino was "seriously injured" in the operation, but apparently survived (nationworldnews.com, August 14).

Palomino began his militant career in 1979 at the age of 19, when he was a student of anthropology at San Cristóbal de Huamanga National University. His decision to join the Shining Path, however, was not all that surprising considering the fact that his father, Martín Quispé Mendoza, was already a member of the group (elcomercio.pe, March 30, 2021).

Moreover, Palomino's brothers, Marco and Jorge Quispé, also joined the group, making it a family affair to join.

After joining Shining Path, Palomino participated in two of the group's most notorious attacks in 1982 and 1983, respectively. The former attack at Vilkashuaman police station killed six police officers and the latter attack at Lucanamarca is widely considered one of South America's worst civilian massacres, with 69 villagers, including children, killed (enterarse.com, September 6, 2021). That massacre was the beginning of the end for Shining Path's hopes of inspiring a mass Communist revolution as the violent acts lost the support of the local population. Indeed, it was a miscalculation by founder and leader Abimael Guzmán to target villagers who were not sympathetic to the group so violently, and justice was served on Guzmán after his arrest in 1992 (he died in prison in 2021) (cbc.ca, October 13, 2006).

Palomino remained with Shining Path until 2018, although his break with the group was largely cosmetic. He simply formed a related organization, the Militarized

Communist Party of Peru in VRAEM, which retained the same ideology but focused on drug smuggling in the cocaine-producing VRAEM (andina.pe, March 9). However, Palomino became even more isolated in 2020 when his brother, Jorge, who formed the new group with him, was killed in an operation that also resulted in the deaths of two Peruvian soldiers (elperuano.pe, March 30, 2021).

It was after Jorge's death that the Second Supraprovincial Criminal Prosecutor's Office Specialized in Human Rights, Interculturality, and Terrorism Crimes of Ayacucho ordered Palomino's capture. The call for his arrest also indicated that Palomino had become the Shining Path leader as early as 1999. The leadership transition likely took place after Guzmán's successor, Oscar Ramirez Durand, whose alias was "Feliciano," was arrested (rpp.pe, September 2).

In the most recent August 19 large-scale army operation to capture Palomino in VRAEM, the army reported that 15 Shining Path members were killed, but Palomino escaped capture (andina.pe, September 3). The army also secured the area around his base, which it believes will guarantee that he cannot return there. Moreover, it is possible the operation will ultimately lead to Palomino's capture because his personal items were captured by the army, including his computer, glasses, and clothing (mercopress.com, August 19).

With his near capture, it appears Palomino's days are numbered. At the same time, the army is planning to turn 40 military bases in VRAEM into development centers to improve the economy of the region (perureports.com, May 5). This, in turn, could reduce the already low recruitment into the Shining Path and related drug trafficking groups like Palomino's (gob.pe, April 29). In fact, it is only the growing irrelevancy of the Communist rebels, despite their continued drug trafficking and occasional attacks, that may afford Palomino an opportunity to escape capture while the army's priorities

are focused elsewhere, such as developing VRAEM economically.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

The Rise of Filipino New People's Army Propagandist Ka Juanito Magbanua

Lucas Webber

The Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its New People's Army (NPA) militant wing have been waging a guerrilla war against the Republic of the Philippines for over 50 years (CPP, December 1, 2021). The CPP and NPA are national organizations, but they are comprised of a network of regional and local groups with designated territorial boundaries. One of the more sizable branches is the NPA branch operating in Negros. This is the third most populous island in the Philippines, and central to NPA operations and messaging is Romeo Nanta, who is better known as "Ka Juanito Magbanua" (Philippines National Statistics Office, 2010).

Family Background

Magbanua is the NPA Negros Island Regional Operational Command Spokesperson and has been deeply involved in the movement since the mid-1990s (CPP, July 22). He is native to the island of Negros and was born in a small coastal village outside Bacolod City (Orato, August 24, 2021). His family made money selling locally grown coffee and baked rice cakes (bibingka) during his childhood. Although he dreamed of becoming an architect, his family could not afford the required tuition fee.

Ironically, Magbanua ended up enlisting in the navy, was stationed on Mindanao Island, and transported soldiers of the Philippine Marines and Army. He eventually

left the navy after three years with the intention of becoming a merchant marine. He had a hard time finding employment, however, and was not able to get a job after two years of searching ([Orato](#), August 24, 2021). The lack of opportunity forced Magbanua to return to his hometown where “resistance was brewing against the government” ([Orato](#), August 24, 2021). Many of his closest friends belonged to the Kabataang Makabayan (Patriotic Youth, or KM). Alongside this group, he participated in anti-government protests.

Through his involvement in activism, time spent in dissident networks, and KM “educational courses,” Magbanua “began to learn the truth about [his] country” ([Orato](#), August 24, 2021). Although the Philippines has abundant natural resources and economic potential, he learned the people “are kept poor by U.S. imperialism, domestic feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism.”

Joining the NPA

Against the wishes of his family, Magbanua joined the NPA in 1994 and obtained a position in the media and communications sphere that would ultimately set him on the trajectory to become a prominent and nationally known NPA spokesman. At the time, the revolutionary movement was deeply divided, and Magbanua joined during the nascent stage of the group’s “rebirth” and subsequent development to where it stands today ([Red Spark](#), December 25, 2016). He recalls that in the early 1990s his small band of fighters “survived the next few years with nary a scratch despite major offensives involving one or more Army battalions before it deployed small teams to undertake recovery and expansion work ([Red Spark](#), December 25, 2016).”

He further recounted how he “went up to the mountains to fight” and “was assigned to a squad-sized armed propaganda unit responsible for growing our ranks.” His unit recruited from local populations with messaging about how they “had a right to

a decent living, just wages, benefits based on their work, and, most of all, their own land ([Orato](#), August 24, 2021).” According to Magbanua, in addition to militant activities, he would “help organize the locals in demanding lower rent, abolishing predatory loans, and developing cooperative farming practices,” and “when that wouldn’t work, we’d seize the farmland by force.” Looking back, he recalled that “after 27 years of joining the NPA, I don’t have any regrets even though I was not able to achieve my dream of becoming an architect ([Orato](#), August 24, 2021).” Due to Magbanua’s activities, the Philippine government has aggressively pursued him. He has even noted the recent intensification of military operations against his regional command ([Negros Revolutionary Portal](#), August 13).

Magbanua’s precise location is still not publicly known. However, in late February, the government conducted a raid at Sitio Montara, Barangay Kamang-kamang in Isabela, Negros Occidental, where Magbana was suspected of residing. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) stated he “evaded arrest” and that the joint police/military raid nabbed another alleged NPA member in possession of firearms, ammunition, and explosives ([Philippine News Agency](#), February 23).

Magbanua and the Army’s Narrative War

Magbanua, being a prominent NPA figure, has also been the target of information operations by the Philippine government. For instance, the public affairs chief of the 3rd Infantry Division, Army Captain Kim Apitong, impugned him as a “terrorist” and claimed he is “on the run” and “frustrated” due to a loss of support from the local population ([DNX](#), February 23). These statements reflect how the government and the NPA have been engaged in a narrative war over recent military operations against Magbanua and his cadres. The Philippine army and national police further accuse the Negros Island NPA network of killing innocent civilians and

"assure the Negrenses that this kind of terrorism will never go unpunished ([DNX](#), February 23)."

Conversely, Magbanua and the NPA commonly accuse government security forces of being the ones committing murder and human rights abuses ([Negros Revolutionary Portal](#), August 15). Following the July 6 killing of Nikka dela Cruz (Ka Chai), a former journalist and activist, Magbanua stated the military killed her and fellow fighters "in cold blood" ([CPP](#), July 8). Magbanua also commonly chides the government for "routinely declaring fake encounters to cover up their failure to defeat the revolutionary movement on the island" ([CPP](#), August 13).

Conclusion

As a national network of interlinked regional hubs, skilled leaders and propagandists like Magbanua are essential to the CPP/NPA movement's vitality. He was born and raised in the region and knows the people and terrain extensively, while his navy background, commitment to the cause, and almost two decades worth of experience as a propagandist make him uniquely effective in his role as NPA Negros Island Regional Operational Command spokesperson.

The Philippine government recognizes the crucial roles that individuals like Magbanua play, and places a premium on high-ranking figures within the movement ([PNA](#), January 13 ; [PNA](#), October 31, 2021). The intensified military and police operations specifically targeting Magbanua are a testament to the important role he plays within the Communist insurgency ([The Manila Times](#), July 30).

Lucas Webber is a researcher focused on geopolitics and violent non-state actors. He is cofounder and editor at [militantwire.com](#).

A Profile of Bashir Zaib: The Radical Leader of the Baluch Liberation Army in Pakistan

Kiyya Baloch

Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan region has been experiencing bloodshed and a dramatic surge in attacks by Baluch separatist and nationalist militants seeking separation from Pakistan. There has been a series of well-organized ambushes and suicide attacks on law enforcement agencies and Chinese nationals inside and outside of the turbulent Baluchistan region since 2018 ([Terrorism Monitor](#), May 20). As recently as September 26, the Baluch Liberation Army (BLA) claimed to have shot down a Pakistani military chopper and killed six army officials ([Twitter/The Baluchistan Post](#), September 26). The Pakistani military confirmed the crash during a late-night mission in southwestern Baluchistan and acknowledged that all six soldiers perished, but without elaborating on the cause of the crash ([Dawn](#), September 26). The chopper had initially been dispatched to rescue two officials who were taken hostage by the BLA ([Twitter/TBPEnglish](#), September 26).

Earlier, another lethal attack by BLA occurred in April in the southern port of Karachi when a minibus was targeted by a female suicide bomber, who killed three Chinese citizens and their Pakistani driver ([Dawn](#), April 26). And before then, in February, the BLA had launched two back-to-back suicide attacks in Baluchistan's Panjgur and Nushki districts. The group claimed to have killed 195 soldiers, although this number was rejected by the Pakistani military ([India Today](#), March 22).

Such organized and large-scale attacks demonstrate that Baluch insurgents, and especially the BLA, have become more lethal over time. They have changed their old tactics from hit-and-run operations to suicide bombings. But why is there such a dramatic change in tactics now, and what factor has specifically been behind the

BLA's increasing sophistication? Could it be due to a change in BLA leadership that placed Bashir Zaib at the group's helm?

Who is Bashir Zaib?

The BLA's new leader, Bashir Zaib, is a middle-class, calm, and well-spoken man in his forties. After Aslam Baluch, the former BLA supreme leader, was killed by a clandestine suicide bomber allegedly connected to Pakistani intelligence on December 25, 2018 in Afghanistan's Kandahar province, Zaib was unanimously selected as BLA leader by the senior command council and operational core committee ([Express Tribune](#), December 26, 2018; [Baluchistan Times](#), December 25, 2018). After this, Zaib continued Aslam Baluch's legacy and mission by strengthening BLA tactics and carrying out more killings and suicide bombings.

Zaib is the son of a doctor from *Nushki*, a town around 145 kilometers east of the Baluchistan provincial capital Quetta. He belongs to the Muhammad Hasni tribe, one of the largest tribes scattered throughout several districts of southern Baluchistan. After finishing his primary education requirements in Nushki, he completed his regular 12-year education at the Degree College in Quetta ([Youtube/Baluch Audio Lyrics](#), April 25).

Following the completion of higher secondary schooling, Zaib was admitted to Polytechnic College in Quetta and earned a diploma in mechanical engineering. After this, Zaib secured admission to a master's program in Baluch literature in 2008. While doing this, he also remained the chairman of the Baluch Students Organization (BSO) Azad ("Azad" means "Independence" in Urdu), which is a banned *radical* student organization that campaigns for Baluchistan's separation from Pakistan ([The Baluchistan Post](#), November 20, 2020). Zaib served as the BSO Azad chairman from 2008 to 2012. As a result, his admission into the University of Baluchistan was prohibited in 2008, and several raids were carried out at the

university to arrest him. Zaib escaped all those raids, however ([The Baluchistan Post](#), November 20, 2020; [Hum Sub](#), April 27).

An intensive crackdown on BSO Azad led to its nation-wide ban in March 2013, but instead of solving the problem of radicalization, this triggered a new phase of militancy as many of its leaders, activists, and members were then forced to join Baluch armed movements. Zaib himself joined BLA in 2012, for example. He then inducted many of his friends into the BLA, whose feelings of alienation and marginalization drove them to militancy. Once led by tribal chieftains and feudal lords, today, the BLA comprises mainly middle-class former BSO Azad activists, doctors, engineers, and even ex-Pakistani army officials. Mr. Rehman Gul, a Pakistani army captain who now trains BLA's suicide bombers, has led the group's suicide wing called the Majeed Brigade and is the most well-known face of the BLA after Zaib ([Terrorism Monitor](#), January 25, 2019; [Hum Sub](#), April 27).

Zaib's Motivations

Before joining BLA, Zaib could frequently be found in the provincial capital Quetta distributing anti-Pakistan literature that educated youth about the mineral-rich Baluchistan's resources, which he would argue were being plundered and looted by Punjabis from Pakistan's largest and most powerful province. He accordingly organized large political rallies, recruited new members for the banned BSO Azad, and mobilized fellow students to fight against the Pakistani State.

In 2010, the Pakistani military launched a major crackdown against BSO Azad, arresting and killing many of its members. Many of them were forced to go underground or join the armed struggle ([The Baluchistan Post](#), November 20, 2020). BSO Azad's activities were also kept off limits to journalists to maintain operational security, which also meant Zaib became somewhat of an enigma.

Much like his predecessor Aslam Baluch, and BLF founder Dr. Allah Nazar, Zaib actively uses social media to suffuse recruitment videos and warnings to China and Pakistan. Zaib has not shied away from recording and sharing these videos on social media, which increased his popular appeal. In a video message released in February, the former student leader warned of an intense “war against Pakistan” and invited Baluch youth to join the BLA ([Newscomworld.com](https://www.newscomworld.com), Feb 13). He claimed that “today our resources are being auctioned off” and “unfortunately, someone gets up and asks for a share in the name of Baluch representation, asking for a percentage. Some say give us 25%; some say give us 50%. In history, when the conquerors have conquered an area, they occupied it and started looting, and today, it is still a part of [conquest], but its color is different” ([Youtube/NewscomWorld](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NewscomWorld), February 13).

Zaib’s leadership of the BLA has increased fears that the Baluch insurgency may become even more violent in the future. Since taking command of the group in 2018, several changes in the group’s tactics have been seen that Pakistani officials claim are linked to the current crisis in Afghanistan. These tactics include five suicide attacks under Zaib’s leadership ([Twitter/KiyyaBaluch](https://twitter.com/KiyyaBaluch), April 27). There are further concerns in Pakistan that the West and India will use Baluch rebels as a proxy to aggravate the insurgency in Baluchistan and choke Chinese investment in the region. Zaib has also been urging the U.S, European Union, and India to help Baluch insurgents counter the Chinese presence in Pakistan via his video messages ([Sangar Online](https://www.sangaronline.com), March 23, 2019).

Conclusion

Bashir Zaib is the latest breed of educated middle-class youth to join the Baluch insurgent movement. As Pakistan continues its crackdown on the BLA and other Baluch insurgent groups, there will, at best, only be temporary moments of peace in Baluchistan. Moreover, the

security-centric approach will continue to increase resentment among Baluch youth and encourage more of them to join the ranks of militant groups like the BLA. Zaib will wisely exploit Islamabad’s non-political approach in dealing with the Baluchistan problem and will likely continue to adopt new tactics that will only make the BLA appear more radical.

Under Zaib, BLA seems to have become revitalized. Therefore, Pakistan will utilize all of its resources to kill or capture Zaib. It is yet to be seen, however, whether hunting down the top leadership matters in the long run as the organization appears to become more entrenched and lethal with each successive generation of leaders, as was seen in the aftermath of Aslam Baluch’s assassination. Zaib himself has also asserted that the insurgency will move forward even if he is not alive, saying “in terms of ideology, in terms of thought, in terms of morale, there is no shortage of Baluch youth” to continue the cause of Baluch separation from Pakistan ([Youtube/NewscomWorld](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NewscomWorld), February 13).

Kiyya Baloch, a freelance journalist, reports on the insurgency, politics, and Baloch militancy in Balochistan. He tweets at @KiyyaBaloch.

Zhasulan Dyuisembin: An In-Depth Look at a Kazakh Foreign Fighter's Journey to the Ukrainian Army

Nurbek Bekmurzaev

On June 2, the National Security Committee of Kazakhstan (KNB) launched a criminal case in absentia against a Kazakh national for participating in the war in Ukraine ([Inform Buro](https://www.informburo.kz), June 2). The KNB statement did not reveal any information about the identity and allegiances of this individual. The criminal case was based on Article 172 of the Criminal Code of Kazakhstan regarding “intentionally and

illegally taking part in armed hostilities in foreign countries,” with up to nine years of imprisonment as a penalty ([Ulys Media](#), June 2).

The absence of details in the KNB statement did not leave anyone in the dark about the target of this criminal case. By the beginning of June, a Kazakh national, Zhasulan Dyuisembin, had amassed fame due to his significant media presence as the only Kazakh fighting in Ukraine against the invading Russian army ([Ulys Media](#), June 10). In interviews to news outlets and on his social media pages, Zhasulan often showcased and talked about the ongoing war in Ukraine and the risk of Russia one day seeking to occupy Kazakhstan’s northern provinces, where ethnic Russians form approximately 40 to 50 percent of the population ([Caravan](#), June 30, 2021).

Zhasulan has acquired even more fame since the KNB decided to prosecute him, thanks to his increased media presence, his receiving an award from Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelenskiy, and his recruitment into the Ukrainian army’s most famous battle group—the Azov Regiment. This article examines Zhasulan’s messages conveyed in interviews of him and social media posts. It further analyzes how his media presence not only challenges the Russian narratives of the war in Ukraine, but also warns of a scenario where Russia eventually invades Kazakhstan’s northern provinces.

The Path to Liberation from Propaganda

In order to understand Zhasulan’s rise to stardom among pro-Ukraine foreign fighters, it is necessary to explore his background. Zhasulan has a relatable character, since he positions himself as an ordinary guy who has spent many years of his life as a victim of the Kazakh state and Russian propaganda. He was born in 1992 in a small town called Arkalyk located in Kostanay province in northern Kazakhstan.

In 1999, his family moved to the Kazakh capital of Astana where they lived in a poor and crime-ridden neighborhood ([Ukrainskaia Pravda](#), July 1). Zhasulan was raised by a single parent, his mother, and the family struggled financially. He started working at the age of 13 at construction sites and did not have funds to go to university upon graduating from high school. At the age of 18, Zhasulan enrolled in the army and served in Kazakhstan’s only marine corp regiment. He continued to work at construction sites after being discharged from the army ([Radio Azattyk](#), June 6).

In 2015, Zhasulan decided to go to Kyiv with the goal of finding out if Russian propaganda was actually true and if Ukraine was full of fascists and Nazis. In his own words, he “really wanted to see these violent people in person” and first “looked at Ukrainian people as villains and barbarians” as a result of following the crisis there through Russian news channels since 2014 ([Radio Azattyk](#), June 6). In this regard, he confesses that he became a “brainwashed zombie.”

Zhasulan was pleasantly surprised when he spoke to everyone in the Russian language and did not witness any discrimination from the Ukrainian people. Instead, everyone was friendly and helpful ([Media Zona](#), May 4). His experience living in Ukraine and interacting with people there for two years completely changed his outlook on the military conflict in eastern Ukraine and on Russia in general.

Motives for Fighting the Russian Army

After spending two years in Kyiv, Zhasulan returned to Kazakhstan in 2017, where he confessed to having struggled to reintegrate back to his home community. The main reason for this was that people back home believed the Russian propaganda about Ukraine ([Media Zona](#), May 4). In 2019, he, therefore, moved back to Ukraine, but this time to Kharkiv, and married a Ukrainian woman, with whom he had two daughters. His family is

one of the main reasons why Zhasulan joined the Ukrainian army in the fall of 2021. Speaking of his involvement in the fighting in Donetsk, he explained that “Russia is terrorizing Ukraine. God forbid, my children suffer. They also have Ukrainian blood, and it is my duty to protect them. That's why I'm here ([Radio Azattyk](#), June 6).” This explanation provided legitimacy for his involvement in the war in Ukraine, despite his foreign origin, and made Zhasulan a sympathetic figure to Kazakh audiences.

Another reason for Zhasulan’s decision to fight against the invading Russian army is related to his homeland—Kazakhstan. Zhasulan believes that the Russian leadership has military ambitions that go beyond Ukraine. He put it plainly: “I am Kazakh, and I understand that Russia will not stop at Ukraine, it will go further, thus we must make every effort so that our Kazakhstan does not suffer ([Radio Azattyk](#), June 6).” According to this reasoning, he is fighting a preventive war in Ukraine, the outcome of which could decide not just the fate of Ukraine but also of Kazakhstan.

Such framing has allowed Zhasulan to garner support among people in Kazakhstan who have long harbored fears that Russia may attempt to orchestrate military conflict and instability in Kazakhstan’s northern provinces bordering Russia ([Radio Azattyk](#), December 29, 2020). In this regard, on his now blocked Instagram account, Zhasulan regularly exposed ethnic Russian Kazakhstani citizens who are supportive of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, hold chauvinist views in relation to ethnic Kazakhs, or advocate the potential annexation of their home provinces by Russia. His Instagram accounts, @jazzmorpeh, @qazaq4308 and @jazzqazaq, were all blocked in June and July ostensibly due to his posts containing violence or calls for violence against the Russian army.

Zhasulan is not the only person to have his social media curtailed since the beginning of the war. At the end of July, a group of

Ukrainian public figures and celebrities wrote a letter to President Zelenskiy to address the incessant bans being placed on their Facebook and Instagram pages by Meta (formerly Facebook) for war-related posts ([TCH](#), July 30). Zhasulan has managed to bypass these difficulties by creating new Instagram pages and giving interviews to various media sources and having his videos reposted by other Instagram users.

Zhasulan’s Views in Perspective

Zhasulan’s fears are not unfounded, especially in light of the outburst by former Russian President and Prime Minister and current Deputy Chairman of Russia’s Security Council, Dmitrii Medvedev. In a post on his official page on the Russian social network, VKontakte, on August 2, Medvedev called Kazakhstan “an artificial state” and promised that Russia would reclaim and return its territories there after the end of the war in Ukraine ([Fact Check](#), August 19). However, Medvedev was not the first Russian official to question Kazakhstan’s territorial integrity. In December 2020, a member of the Russian parliament, Vyacheslav Nikonov, claimed that “the territory of Kazakhstan is a big gift from Russia and the Soviet Union ([KazTag](#), April 10).” Such statements by Russian officials have rattled the Kazakh government and people, since they resemble Russian rhetoric regarding Crimea and other parts of Ukraine. They also serve as a foundation for the fears voiced by Zhasulan that Russia will not stop at Ukraine and will instigate military conflict in Kazakhstan in an attempt to capture Kazakh lands.

Kazakhstan is Russia’s strategic ally and a close political and economic partner. The two countries are also military allies through membership in the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The government of Kazakhstan, contrastingly, has remained neutral regarding the war in Ukraine despite these ties. In June, Kazakhstan’s president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev stated that

Kazakhstan would not recognize the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples' Republics as independent states and called them "quasi-state formations" all while sitting next to Vladimir Putin at the Saint Petersburg Economic Forum ([Vlast](#), June 17). However, Zhasulan was quick to downplay the importance of this defiance by Tokayev and called it an orchestrated scene for Kazakhstan to avoid being sanctioned for helping Russia bypass sanctions ([Ukrainskaia Pravda](#), July 1).

Nevertheless, Tokayev's statement was in line with the stance adopted by the Kazakh government from the outset of the war in Ukraine. The country's stance can be summarized in the Kazakh Foreign Affairs Minister's statement that it "has vested interests in Ukraine being a stable, independent and territorially integral state", and "this is a consistent and principled approach of our country, based on the principles of the UN charter ([Masa Media](#), July 14)." In this regard, Zhasulan's stance coincides with the official position of the authorities, as he has called on Kazakh soldiers to remain neutral and refuse to travel to Ukraine in case they are ordered to aid the Russian army fighting there (Instagram/[@aidosabdrahman](#), May 26).

Conclusions

Zhasulan's story is much more than just a look at a soldier's life inside the Ukrainian army. For many ordinary people in Kazakhstan who are against the war in Ukraine and condemn the Russian government, he provides an outlet to express support and solidarity for Ukraine and to voice their fears that a fate similar to that of Ukraine awaits Kazakhstan, whose northern provinces bordering Russia are home to large ethnic Russian communities with pro-Russian views. His ongoing prosecution by the KNB seems to represent a rather symbolic gesture and is aimed at discouraging other Kazakh nationals from traveling to Ukraine and participating in the war there, while pleasing Kazakhstan's largest security, economic and political partner, Russia. In

any scenario, the prospects of Zhasulan ending up in a Kazakh prison are slim at this point. Should he survive this war, he will seek Ukrainian citizenship and remain in Ukraine until a better time for his return home presents itself. A time when he will not be at risk of being prosecuted for fighting in Ukraine.

Nurbek Bekmurzaev is an independent researcher and freelance journalist based in Bishkek.