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Saeed Aghajani, Mehdi Molashahi, and Javad Keiha: The Masterminds Behind Iran's Drone Program?

Joseph Brennan

Over the last several weeks, the United States, UK, and European Union sanctioned three military commanders and a defense company over allegedly supplying drones to Russia for use in their war against Ukraine. The sanctions consist of travel bans and asset freezes on Major-General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, chief of staff of Iran's armed forces, General Seyed Hojjatollah Qureishi, a defense official, and Brigadier-General Saeed Aghajani, the commander in charge of the IRGC's Aerospace Force "UAV command" ([Iran International](#), 10/20/2022). The company that produces the Shahed-136 drones found in Ukraine, called Shahed Aviation Industries, was also sanctioned. By supplying drones to Russia, Iran has taken the war into a dangerous new phase ([Iran International](#), 10/20/2022).

According to the UK and EU, Aghajani, also known as Saeed Ara Jani, is one of the

masterminds of Iran's drone program. He oversees the IRGC UAV Command, directing the planning of operations, equipment allocation, and training for UAV operations ([Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office](#), 10/20/2022; [Iran International](#), 10/20/2022). Under his leadership, the IRGC UAV Command conducted an attack on July 29, 2021, targeting the commercial shipping vessel Mercer Street off the coast of Oman, which resulted in two casualties. Aghajani also orchestrated the UAV attack against a Saudi Arabian oil refinery back in 2019. For both of these actions, he was sanctioned by the U.S. ([U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), 10/29/2021). Iranian UAV's have been responsible for multiple high-profile attacks against international shipping over the last several years, including two last year ([ifmat.org](#), 8/9/2021). In all likelihood, Aghajani has been the mastermind behind these operations, and has been heavily involved in the planning and execution of them. The attacks have resulted in injuries to Norwegian, Emirati, and Saudi individuals, and now widespread civilian casualties inside Ukraine. Recent reports from Ukraine indicate that military units

under the umbrella of the IRGC UAV command have been seen in the captured territories and Crimea ([Arkansas Democrat Gazette](#), 10/21/2022). These units are being coordinated by Aghajani along with Major-General Bagheri, who helps Aghajani oversee the drone program. Aghajani was born in 1969, making him 53 years old.

Despite the sanctions and reports, there has been more confusion than would otherwise be expected concerning who heads the supply operations of Iran's drone fleet. On October 25, the official Iranian news agency Tasnim reported that two members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were killed by unidentified gunmen in the southeastern city of Zahedan ([Baltic News Network](#), 10/26/2022). The men, Colonel Mehdi Molashahi and General Javad Keiha, were personnel of the Salman Corps of Sistan and Baluchistan, and were reportedly gunned down in their car while driving through the city. According to the Baltic News Network, they were responsible for organizing drone supplies to Russia. RBK-Ukraine reported that Russia purchased several thousand Shaher-136 and Mohajer-6 strike drones from Iran and is using them in the war, with the help of Iranian personnel located in captured territories, while more drones are set to arrive this November ([mil.in.ua](#), 11/1/2022). It is unknown whether the drones were purchased with the help of these two persons, as well as who the assailants were. No terrorist organization affiliated with the Baluch separatist movement has yet to take credit for the killings, leaving suspicions of Israeli covert operatives as the party responsible.

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The Mysterious Detention of Tukur Mamu: Boko Haram Conspirator or Simple Newspaper Editor?

Jacob Zenn

On September 9, the Nigerian security services announced that military equipment was found in the home of Kaduna-based *Desert Herald* newspaper editor, Tukur Mamu ([premiumtimes.com](#), September 9). This followed Mamu's detainment in Cairo International Airport and deportation back to Nigeria, where he was arrested at the airport in northern Nigeria's largest city of Kano ([premiumtimes.com](#), September 7). Prior to his arrest, Mamu had been negotiating the exchange of dozens of hostages who had been taken captive by a murky contingent of bandits and jihadists from a train on the Abuja-Kaduna expressway.

Notably, only days after Mamu's arrest, the hostage-takers released the last 23 of their remaining hostages, suggesting that somehow Mamu's detainment placed pressure on the hostage-takers to make concessions ([dailypost.ng](#), October 5). Further, longtime Boko Haram members who had been arrested as early as the start of the insurgency in 2009 were reportedly freed from prison in exchange for the hostage-takers' release of the train hostages ([fij.ng](#), October 9). Among those released Boko Haram members was "Alhaji Kamar," whose last name indicates he was among the five Kamar sons alongside Boko Haram founder Muhammed Yusuf, who was killed in 2009. After Yusuf's death, one Kamar son, Abubakar Adam, became a key intermediary between al-Qaeda and Boko Haram ([france24.com](#), April 3, 2016). This further supports assertions that the bandits in northwestern Nigeria, and specifically in the train hostage-taking, are tied to Boko Haram.

What makes Mamu unique is not only his role as the intermediary between the train hostage-takers and therefore also jihadists on the one end and the government on the other end, but also his ties to Muhammed

Yusuf and Yusuf's cohorts as early as 2009. Mamu, who is from Yusuf's and his successor Abubakar Shekau's native Yobe State, had personally known and sympathized with Yusuf before Nigerian security forces killed Yusuf extrajudicially in 2009 ([Desert Herald](#), January 6, 2015)). While Mamu was never known to support the militancy of the Ansaru faction, which was founded in 2012, he, like Kaduna-based Ansaru, resented the "mainstream" Muslim leadership in Nigeria that "sold out" to the West, including by wearing cowboy hats on international trips. He also believed Nigerian Muslim scholars did not sufficiently defend Muslims, and especially Fulanis, during their conflicts with Christians ([Facebook.com/mysunna1](#), December 7, 2017). This did not mean Mamu necessarily supported the violence that Boko Haram carried out after Yusuf's death, but it did mean he was "linked" to the group from the start and then later Ansaru and, most recently, the bandit-jihadist hostage-takers in the train attacks.

Mamu became the intermediary for Ansaru within three years of Yusuf's death in 2012. Ansaru has since 2012 been the al-Qaeda affiliate in Nigeria and has opposed Shekau's killing of innocent Muslims, which Ansaru believes has deviated from Yusuf's creed ([Terrorism Monitor](#), January 10, 2013). For example, when Ansaru clarified its position that it disagreed with Shekau but could potentially "work together" with Shekau's faction in 2012, the Ansaru spokesman released that statement to Mamu at *Desert Herald*. That statement also foretold how Ansaru members would indeed cooperate with rival factions in the future, including at the time with Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), which, like Ansaru, opposed Shekau's ruthlessness ([al-Haqaiq](#), June 2018). However, the Ansaru spokesman later criticized Mamu for downplaying the fact that Ansaru was actually a jihadist group, rather than some form of community self-defense organization ([Desert Herald](#), June 2, 2012). In other words, Mamu seemed to want Ansaru to be the latter, but Ansaru

reaffirmed it indeed was an al-Qaeda-aligned "jihadist" group.

Mamu's proximity to Muhammed Yusuf and later Ansaru, if not also being the first journalist to interview Shekau after Yusuf's death, meant he has always attracted security forces' attention and has been closer to the group than virtually any other outsider. He was, therefore, arrested in 2010 and 2013, among other times, on suspicion of supporting Boko Haram ([Saharareporters.com](#), February 7, 2010; [Saharareporters.com](#), September 4, 2013). Thus, the latest arrest is not out of the ordinary for Mamu, but the weapons found in his home connects him to militancy in a way unseen before.

Until Mamu's court trial plays out and the scope of his militant support becomes more well known, it is safest to say that Mamu has played a constructive role in relaying some of the highly clandestine Boko Haram factions' messages to the public and negotiating the release of innocent civilians, even if he helped the jihadists' messaging if not also financing, as well. The prospective Mamu trial will likely reveal whether Mamu engaged in these activities with neutrality or with the desire to advance the jihadists' militant cause. If the latter is proven, it appears the Nigerian security services will have no qualms about Mamu receiving a lengthy prison sentence ([vanguardngr.com](#), September 14).

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Abu Muhammad al-Tajiki and the Making of a Model ISKP Martyr

Lucas Webber

A notable trend exists of Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) martyrs becoming internet icons in the South and Central Asian pro-Islamic State (IS) online ecosystem. Abu Muhammad al-Tajiki

joined these ranks on June 18 when he conducted a suicide bombing against Kabul's Gurdwara Karta-e-Parwan temple that killed two people, including an Afghan Sikh ([Tribune India](#), June 18). The Islamic State's Amaq News Agency published an official release stating the attack against the "temples for Hindu and Sikh polytheists" was conducted in retaliation to blasphemous remarks about the Prophet Muhammad made by a spokesman of India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Sikhs are a vulnerable minority in Afghanistan, and have fled the country in increasing numbers for India and other destinations as a result of being targeted by Islamist militants. According to some estimates, the number of Sikhs in Afghanistan has declined from hundreds of thousands in the 1970s to a figure now in the low hundreds ([France24](#), June 19).

There were two core features of the operation that elevated the status of al-Tajiki: first, the retaliatory cause for which he conducted the attack; and, second, his Tajik background and identity ([Terrorism Monitor](#), September 23).

IS explicitly stated that al-Tajiki's attack was conducted as revenge for blasphemous remarks made by right-wing Indian politicians ([Times of India](#), June 19). Moreover, the global and regional IS media spheres leveraged the attacker's Tajik background to serve as an example to potential supporters in ethnic, national, and linguistic communities with which he was associated. Yet, al-Tajiki's attributes, devotion to the cause, and diversified roles in ISKP transcended any niche ethnic Tajik boundaries. He is accordingly held up as an example for the broader global IS movement to follow and was no average suicide bomber, with prominent positions in operations and training while also leading a Tajik-language ISKP media unit.

Abu Muhammad al-Tajiki's Legacy

ISKP's official propaganda wing, al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production, profiled Abu Muhammad al-Tajiki in recent issues of

its magazines Voice of Khurasan in English and Khurasan Ghag in Pashto ([Twitter/@Valle Riccardo](#), June 30). The group opened by asking "who was the commando brother who avenged the Prophet?" To answer this, the group stated that he was an insurgent instructor and "beloved trainer of hundreds of mujahidin." ISKP claimed he had long wanted to attain martyrdom as he "prepared, trained, and taught practical plans to hundreds of brothers who were upon the truth and willing to do *istishhad* (martyrdom)." The group noted that he had a health affliction and could not become a father, but became a "truly spiritual father to hundreds of mujahidin youngsters." [1]

Al-Tajiki trained a group of suicide bombers, which included Julaybib al-Kabuli, who detonated his suicide bomb at a Pakistani Shiite mosque in Peshawar on March 4, killing more than 50 people, and Shahram Muwahid, who attacked the memorial ceremony of Mullah Akhtar Mansour in Kabul, Afghanistan on May 22 ([Twitter/@IbnSiqilli](#), March 4; [Twitter/@Valle Riccardo](#), May 22). In addition to training activities and militant operations, al-Tajiki also occupied an important media role as head of ISKP's Tajik language media wing, which was presumably through al-Azaim. In that post, he was joined by three of his friends and, according to ISKP, he wrote books, articles, magazines, and more. [2]

Islamic State and Pro-IS Media Exaltations

Following al-Tajiki's attack, there were intensive and noteworthy efforts by a global, multi-lingual, and varied range of media and communications groups to build up al-Tajiki's profile posthumously. From the top, IS's central media apparatus revered al-Tajiki through the claims and photos of him released by Amaq News Agency as well as in issue 344 of IS's weekly al-Naba newsletter ([Jihadology](#), June 23). Likewise, at the ISKP branch level, al-Tajiki was touted in Voice of Khurasan and Khurasan Ghag magazines,

by Al-Azaim Tajiki (the Tajik language unit of Al-Azaim), in the ISKP Eid message, and in a Farsi video titled "Flames of Revenge." ([Twitter/@AfghanAnalyst2](https://twitter.com/AfghanAnalyst2), July 8; [Militant Wire](https://militantwire.com), July 10).

In the international pro-IS online realm, the Arabic Tala'a al-Ansar and al-Adiyat Foundation groups featured al-Tajiki in videos, and the Bengali at-Tankeen Media outfit created a poster of him ([Twitter/@cozyduke Apt29](https://twitter.com/cozyduke Apt29), June 27). In regional pro-ISKP circles, he was widely extolled by Tajik groups, including in audio statements by Yusuf Tajiki published in the Movarounnahr and Sadoi Shaykh Telegram channels. [3] Various Tajik channels had his photo as their pinned post for days or weeks. Additionally, the Russian Life of Khurasan, Tajik Movarounnahr, and Sadoi Shaykh channels published graphic-designed images of him with captions, with the latter two also publishing audio statements about him.

Conclusion

Abu Muhammad al-Tajiki was a multifaceted ISKP militant, and his final operation represented an intersection of the group's regional organizational dynamics and vision. He was a Tajik national and appealed to the second largest ethnic group in Afghanistan (Tajiks) as well as communities in Central Asia. Further, he trained fighters and suicide bombers of various backgrounds who went on to conduct major attacks, headed a Tajik language ISKP media group, and made the ultimate sacrifice himself by striking a blow against perceived Indian interests by targeting a Sikh temple to kill Afghan Sikhs, whose religion is associated by ISKP with India. This peculiar combination makes for potent propaganda content while highlighting his character and actions provided a model ISKP pushed its other fighters to emulate.

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Notes

[1] ISKP Al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production, Voice of Khurasan magazine, July 2, 2022.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Movarounnahr is a pro-IS/ISKP Telegram group, but the channel was deleted and then reposted on July 11, 2022.

At War with Pakistan: The Assassination of TTP Commander Omar Khalid Khorasani and its Impact on the "Pakistani Taliban"

Farhan Zahid

After the fall of the Afghan government in August 2021, Taliban-ruled Afghanistan once again emerged as a safe haven for Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the "Pakistani Taliban." Despite serious complaints from the Pakistani government, the Afghan Taliban have taken few measures to dislodge TTP from Afghanistan. In addition, the Afghan Taliban-sponsored peace talks between the Pakistani government and TTP have also failed ([VOA Asia](https://www.voanews.com), August 8).

Given this scenario, TTP high command is now openly seen in Kabul, Kandahar and other cities of Afghanistan. Yet, TTP still suffered a massive loss when prominent commander and emir of Jamaat ul Ahrar, Omar Khalid Khorasani, was killed during a trip to Paktika, Afghanistan in August 2021, while he was based in Kunar, Afghanistan with his family ([Express Tribune](https://www.express-tribune.com), August 9). Who killed him and why they did so has remained a mystery until now. With peace talks stalled, the TTP and Pakistani government are once again at each other's throats due to the assassination.

Khorasani's Career Background

Khorasani's given name is Abdul Wali but he adopted his alias "Omar Khalid

Khorasani" later in life while among other jihadists ([Times of India](#), August 8). He hails from a family belonging to the Safi tribe and was born and raised in the small village of Kandharo in the Safi subdivision of Mohmand district in 1980, where he also attended the local religious seminary of his village school. Later he attended religious seminaries in Karachi and graduated in 1990. [1] During his studies in Karachi, he developed relations with Islamist militant organizations operating in Indian Kashmir and became involved in collecting funds for them in Karachi. In particular, he supported mostly Harkat ul Mujahedeem (HuM). [2]

Soon after the launch of TTP in 2007, he was designated as TTP commander for Mohmand district. He also became part of TTP's central shura and held that post until his death in August. Initially, Khorasani was instrumental as a TTP commander, but he soon developed rifts with then TTP Emir Hakeemullah Mehsud and formed his own faction called Jamaat ul Ahrar without officially parting ways with TTP in 2014 ([VOA Asia, July 7, 2017](#)). He later joined hands with the next TTP Emir Mullah Fazalullah, but maintained his semi-independence with Jamaat ul Ahrar. TTP is not a monolithic entity but rather an umbrella organization comprising more than 42 jihadist organizations mostly based in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and other districts falling under the former Pakistan tribal areas, which meant Jamaat ul Ahrar's existence alongside TTP was not inconsistent with TTP's organizational structure.

In an interview with the jihadist magazine *Iheya-e-Khilafat*, Khorasani also shed light on his jihadist genealogy by stating that his grandfather was involved in "jihad against the British" before the partition of India and the independence of Pakistan. One generation later, his father fought against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan during the Afghan Jihad from 1979 to 1989. During the first Afghan Taliban government from 1996 to 2001, Khorasani himself then joined the Afghan Taliban and served as a

foot soldier in Kunar, which is adjacent to the Pakistani border. [3] Khorasani followed the family tradition by serving the Afghan Taliban during its first rule and later after the commencement of the Global War on Terror in 2001 he provided refuge to on-the-run foreign jihadists and al-Qaeda militants. Ultimately, he joined hands with TTP in 2007 and became the commander of Mohmand district.

A Well-Diversified Jihadist

Khorasani became a peculiar case of a jihadist insofar as profiles of jihadists in Afghanistan and Pakistan are concerned. He eventually trained at an al-Qaeda-run training camp in Afghanistan during the first Afghan Taliban government and then joined TTP in Pakistan and formed his own jihadist outfit affiliated with the TTP. [4] In early 2002, he published his own jihadist magazine "*Mohmand Adbi Guncha [Mohmand Literary Flower]*" while he was based in Mohmand district and provided safe havens to the escaping foreign jihadists after the fall of Afghan Taliban rule in 2002. Among those whom he provided shelter to were Arabs, Uzbeks, Chechens and Chinese Uighurs, who were previously part of Brigade 055 of al-Qaeda in Mohmand district.

These relationships allowed Khorasani to broaden his network to mainland Pakistan and form Jamaat ul Ahrar, which claimed a number of attacks in Lahore following the footsteps of the mother organization, the TTP. The most notable attack they conducted was the Wagah border suicide attack that killed 70 people, although the group also struck other cities in Pakistan ([Al-Jazeera](#), August 8). Apart from being wanted by the Pakistani government, Khorasani was also listed as most wanted by the U.S State Department's Rewards for Justice in March 2018 with a reward of up to \$3 million. His name was also placed on the UN Security Council's sanctions committee (the 1267 Committee) in 2017 ([Dawn](#), August 8).

Khorasani was ultimately killed on August 7 in an IED attack on his vehicle while he was travelling in Barmal district of Paktika province. Two of his accomplices, Mufti Hassan and Hafiz Dawlat Khan, were also killed in the incident ([Dunya News](#), August 8). No individual or organization has yet claimed responsibility of the attack, but the assassination of Khorasani was a major blow to TTP and Jamaat ul Ahrar. He was involved in the then ongoing peace talks between the TTP and the Pakistani government when he was killed ([Terrorism Monitor](#), October 21). The peace talks were held in Kabul under the aegis of the Afghan Taliban in the first half of 2022 and ended with no major outcomes. A number of Khorasani's photographs were also released before the attack while the peace talks were underway, and he was openly roaming around in Afghanistan after the Afghan Taliban took power in August 2021. The fear of U.S drone strikes had ended at that time and perhaps that was one reason why Khorasani became too exposed.

Who was Behind Khorasani's Assassination?

The question thus arises about who could have been behind his assassination. The sophisticated attack is clear proof that the perpetrators were highly skilled and planned the attack diligently. This leaves possibilities of the involvement of Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) whose motive would be to weaken the alliance partners of Afghan Taliban including the TTP; rival TTP factions whose motive would be internal schism; or, most likely the Pakistani intelligence service, who would like him eliminated because of his rigid stance during the talks. Whoever was behind the attack nevertheless managed to inflict a serious blow to the TTP because Khorasani was one of the most capable of all remaining TTP commanders, who are still at war with the Pakistani state.

Conclusion

Khorasani was targeted a number of times by the CIA in drone strikes but he survived

all of them and remained vigilant ([BBC Asia](#), October 19). It was only after the withdrawal of U.S forces and the takeover of Kabul by the Afghan Taliban that he finally felt at home and surfaced in Kabul and other cities, but ironically it was at this point that he was killed. He seems to have become "too casual" after the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan, which was among the reasons why his assassins were able to successfully target him.

As far as the TTP's future course of action and a TTP without Khorasani is concerned, it will be important to assess how TTP reacts to his assassination. TTP has lost a large number of its experienced commanders in U.S drone strikes in the past several years. In a post-U.S era in Afghanistan, TTP aspires to continue attacks in Pakistan while remaining under the protection of the Afghan Taliban.

However, the assassination of Khorasani has changed the overall scenario for TTP in the region. At this moment the talks between TTP and the Pakistani government seem to be a bridge too far. TTP's emir Noor Wali Mehsud will now expend efforts to review TTP's current protocols and strategies for fending off its enemies in and out of Afghanistan.

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Notes:

[1] For details, see: "Special Interview of Omar Khalid Khurasani", *Ihya-e-Khilafat* (Official TTP magazine), September 2013 Issue.

[2] HuM in the early 1990s was the premier jihadist organization in the Indian Kashmir insurgency. It was commanded by Fazal ur Rehman Khalil, one of the co-signatories of the *fatwa* against the Jews and Crusaders

alongside Osama Bin Laden in 1998. HuM operatives were also involved in kidnapping and beheading two Norwegian tourists in Indian Kashmir and hijacked Indian Airline Flight from Kathmandu, Nepal to Kandahar in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan in 2000. The operation resulted in the release of three of HuM's prominent members from Indian prison.

[3] "Special Interview of Omar Khalid Khurasani", *Ihya-e-Khilafat* (Official TTP magazine), September 2013 Issue.

[4] Discussions with Islamabad-based senior journalist and analyst Azaz Syed in Islamabad on October 16, 2022.

Al-Qaeda's Turning Point: Will Saif al-Adl or Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi Succeed Aymen al-Zawahiri?

Daniele Garofalo

On July 31, a U.S drone strike killed al-Qaeda (AQ) leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul, Afghanistan. Al-Zawahiri appears to have lived in a house linked to the family of the powerful Taliban Interior Minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani ([al-Jazeera](#), August 5). Several hours after the news of the al-Qaeda leader's death spread, numerous jihadist reactions were posted on social media and messaging applications. [1]

Although supporters of al-Qaeda initially denied the news of their leader's death, as time passed, a feeling of acceptance spread that he might have been in Kabul and that he may have been killed. In the hours and days that followed, calls spread for revenge attacks against Israel and the U.S and, in some cases, even against the Afghan Taliban. The latter was accused of betraying al-Zawahiri or failing to do their utmost to protect him.

Al-Qaeda supporters, Islamist scholars, and other jihadists, writers and ideologues

have described the death of the al-Qaeda leader as "martyrdom" and have paid tribute to him through eulogies and poems. In several instances, al-Zawahiri's death has been framed as a "good event" for Muslims around the world because it will reinvigorate al-Qaeda's jihad against the "Crusaders." Official al-Qaeda media has not yet officially commented on the news or confirmed al-Zawahiri's death three months later, but it has released propaganda material in which al-Zawahiri appears without specifying whether he is alive or dead ([As-Sahab Media](#), September 12; ([As-Sahab](#), August 26) [2].

This article assesses who the next leader of al-Qaeda might be and whether that leader can lead to breakthroughs for the organization.

Who are al-Qaeda's Leader Candidates?

In recent years, several key veteran al-Qaeda leaders have been killed, which created a vacuum for the succession to the organization's leadership [3]. Nevertheless, there are still several candidates that the al-Qaeda Shura Council could evaluate to succeed al-Zawahiri. The two most important figures are the Egyptian Saif al-Adl and the Moroccan Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi, while other candidates are:

- Abu Abdel al-Karim al-Masri, who is an al-Qaeda veteran in Syria;
- Abu Ubaidah Yusuf al-Annabi, who is the al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) leader;
- Ibrahim al-Qosi, who is also known as Khubayb al-Sudani and is an al-Qaeda veteran and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) principal officer;
- Khalid Batarfi, who is the AQAP leader; and
- Ahmed Omar Diriye, who is also known as Abu Ubaydah and is an al-Shabaab leader.

The choice will likely fall between Saif al-Adl and Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi for several reasons. First, Abu Abdel al-Karim al-Masri's being in Syria could be an obstacle to his assumption of leadership. Further, he is elderly and has difficulty moving around [4]. Moreover, the latest news about him indicates that he is ill and might not live long should he succeed al-Zawahiri. [5]. As for the leaders from AQAP, after the death of Nasser Al-Wuhayshi, who was killed in a U.S drone strike in 2015, there is not a leader charismatic enough among them to lead al-Qaeda as a whole (arabnews.com, June 16, 2015). Further, they may not be accepted by all affiliates. The same applies to the leaders of AQIM and al-Shabaab, who besides logistical and geographical difficulties to connect other affiliations, do not have a long jihadist history in al-Qaeda Central. [6]

Saif al-Adl al-Masri and the Problem of Iran

Saif al-Adl is a veteran Egyptian al-Qaeda operative and is currently a member of al-Qaeda's senior leadership council, the Majlis al-Shura, and heads the organization's military committee. His given name is Mohammed Salahuddin Zeidan, and he was born in the Governorate of Menoufia, Egypt between 1960 and 1963 and graduated from the Faculty of Engineering in Egypt (Al-Jazeera, August 3). After completing his military service in the Egyptian army, he moved to Saudi Arabia and later decided to travel to Afghanistan to fight in 1989 in the Soviet-Afghan War (Al-Arabiya, September 4).

Al-Adl ran al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the 1990s. In 1992, he continued his work as a trainer in Sudan, where the Qaeda leadership had moved, and trained more militants, particularly in the use of explosives. [7] In 1992 and 1993, he also provided military training to al-Qaeda operatives and Somali tribesmen who fought against U.S forces in

Mogadishu during Operation Restore Hope (Al-Jazeera, August 3).

During those years in Sudan, the al-Qaeda leadership met high-level representatives of the Iranian government to obtain training in the use of explosives from Hezbollah military commanders. Saif al-Adl participated in the training at a Hezbollah camp in the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon (Akhbar al-Aan, August 2). After the expulsion of al-Qaeda from Sudan, al-Adl continued his training activities back in Afghanistan.

Al-Adl helped plan al-Qaeda's bomb attacks against the U.S embassies in Nairobi and Dar as Salaam in 1998 and that of the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000 (Al-Arabiya, September 4). In 2001, he then took command of the defense of Kandahar against U.S forces and proved to be highly capable. Shortly afterward, he decided to take refuge in Iran, where he spent most of the next decade under house arrest in Tehran. In 2004, in addition to his role in al-Qaeda as a trainer and military leader, he began to manage the administrative affairs of the organization directly from Tehran and gained more importance from 2011 onwards by weaving together important ties with Syrian and Yemeni leaders (Sanaa Center, August 12).

In 2010, he was released in a prisoner swap deal with al-Qaeda. The terms of the deal between AQAP and Iran provided for the release of an Iranian diplomat in exchange for the release of al-Qaeda leaders in Iran, but the agreement stipulated that al-Adl and Abu Muhammad al-Masri had to remain in Iran and could not leave. In 2011, Al-Adl was appointed as al-Qaida's chief caretaker after Osama bin Laden's death until the appointment of al-Zawahiri to the leadership (Al-Arabiya, August 2; India.com, August 4). Since 2015, al-Adl has mostly supervised the dossiers of the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda from his base in Iran. [8]

Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi: Also Susceptible to Iranian Influences?

Born in Morocco, Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi, whose real name is Mohammed Abattay, is the second contender to succeed Ayman al-Zawahiri. He is a veteran of al-Qaeda, director of the al-Qaeda media arm *As-Sahab*, coordinator of al-Qaeda affiliates and foreign relations, and son-in-law and personal advisor to the late former al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri ([Tunisie Telegraph](#), August 3; [Akhbar al-Aan](#), August 2).

At around the age of 26, he left Morocco to study software programming in Cologne, Germany. In 1999, he then joined al-Qaeda's al-Farouk training camp near Kandahar, Afghanistan. While in the al-Farouk camp, al-Maghrebi stayed in the "House of Martyrs," which was led by Saif al-Adl at the time. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, he fled to Iran, and in 2003 he took refuge in Pakistan, where he led *as-Sahab* until 2012 ([Sawt Beirut](#), August 23 - ([Al-Arabiya](#), August 2).

Al-Maghrebi later returned to Iran to direct external communications and propaganda and to supervise and coordinate the activities of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. His ability to evade U.S intelligence earned him the nickname "al-Qaeda's fox" ([Africa-Press](#), August 25 - [Akhbar al-Aan](#), August 2). It is believed that al-Maghrebi, like Saif al-Adl, still resides in Iran, although several sources report that al-Maghrebi returned to Waziristan several years ago and met with al-Qaeda's central leadership there. [9] If confirmed, that could strongly indicate that he will become the next leader.

Conclusion

There are several probable reasons for the delay in the announcement of the new al-Qaeda leader, including:

- The absence of potential leadership successors from the areas where al-Qaeda Central is located in Afghanistan or Pakistan;

- The lack of communication between al-Qaeda Central and more distant affiliates; and
- The disagreement in choosing between the two main candidates: Saif al-Adl and Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi.

The most significant obstacle to Saif al-Adl's rise to the leadership is his presence in Iran, as the Shura Council, leaders and affiliates will not agree to swear allegiance to him until he leaves the country. Although described as less charismatic than Osama bin Laden, he is a veteran of the first al-Qaeda generation, an expert in military and logistical matters, a skilled diplomat, and highly educated and fluent in English. He is also strongly sponsored by Mustafa Hamid [10], who has strong ties with the Taliban and has influences within al-Qaeda.

The hypothesis that instead Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi will take over the leadership of al-Qaeda seems logical because al-Qaeda is strong in Africa and he is al-Zawahiri's son-in-law and was a very influential figure in al-Zawahiri's close circle. He is possibly no longer in Iran, which could be a point in his favor. He has also been described by previous al-Qaeda leaders as intelligent, knowledgeable in religion, and fit for leadership.

Both candidates are younger than al-Zawahiri was at the time of his death and could have an undeniable influence if they rise to the top of al-Qaeda by bringing new ideas and changes within the organization.

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Notes

[1] Numerous social and messaging applications were consulted, including Telegram, Rocket Chat, Tam Tam, Chirpwire, WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

[2] Al-Qaeda Central published after the news of al-Zawahiri's death the seventh part of a series entitled "Deal of the Century" featuring al-Zawahiri, without specifying the phrase "May God protect him" (referring to a living person) as done in previous publications. A later reference to al-Zawahiri is a poem within al-Qaeda Central's magazine "One Ummah," which was attributed to him and mentioned the hijab ban in India. Again, no sentence followed his name to indicate whether he was alive or dead.

[3] The most prominent was undoubtedly the former leader of AQAP, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who was killed in Yemen in 2015; Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, who was killed in Syria in 2017; and Abu Muhammad al-Masri, who was living in Iran when he was assassinated in August 2020.

[4] Author's interview with Muzamjir al-Sham, known as the "Voice of the Jihadist Movement in Sham". He was affiliated with Ahrar al-Sham when the group was close to al-Qaeda. Private Telegram Chats, August/October 2022.

[5] Interview with Saleh al-Hamewi, one of the founders of the al-Nusra Front. Private Telegram Chats, August/October 2022.

[6] Interview with a Syrian jihadist who asked to remain anonymous. Private Telegram and Instagram Chats, September/October 2022.

[7] Saif al-Adl probably gained experience dealing with explosives and intelligence activities during his military service in a special unit of the Egyptian army.

[8] This continued until around 2021, when Hurras al-Din evolved into a series of sleeper cells.

[9] Interview with Saleh al-Hamewi. The news was also communicated by other al-Qaeda-linked militants on Telegram and other apps in September/October 2022.

[10] Mustafa Hamid, also known as Abu Waid al-Masri, was an Egyptian journalist who decided to join the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s and became an influential figure among Afghan commanders and, later, among senior Taliban officials (he was among the first to swear allegiance to Mullah Omar and very close to Jalaluddin Haqqani) and al-Qaeda officials (he formed a strong friendship with Osama Bin Laden, whom he followed both in Sudan and on his return to Afghanistan). He was an al-Qaeda advisor and one of the managers of the important al-Farouk training camp until 1990. He fled Afghanistan to Iran following the 9/11 attacks. In 2003, he was arrested by the Iranians and placed under house arrest. He returned to Egypt in 2011 and decided to move first to Qatar and then back to Iran, where he finally settled in 2016 in Tehran. He runs a very influential website "Mafa World", where he often writes about al-Qaeda (also with strong criticism) and has written more than 15 books on the history of the Afghan-Soviet war and the Arabs who participated in it. Saif al-Adl is his friend and son-in-law, having married his daughter Asma Mustafa Hamed. Details on Mustafa Hamid and his influence on Saif al-Adl and al-Qaeda can be found in several lengthy analyses published in Akhbar al-Aan Media Tv's "Tehran Syndrome" series.