



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

p.1

Brief

Jacob Zenn

p.2

A Portrait of Shahid Mehmood: Lashkar-e-Taiba's International Financier

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

p.4

Abu Zachariah: Islamic State's Little-Known Leader in Southeast Asia

Daniele Garofalo

p.6

The Bizarre Biography of Algerian Jihadist Meraghni "Akil" El-Hadj Ali

Dario Cristiani

VOLUME XIV, ISSUE 1 | January 2023

Mahmood Barry: JNIM's Video Monologue Militant in Mali

Jacob Zenn

The Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) has many different leaders among its ranks, ranging from its head, the Tuareg Iyad ag Ghaly, to the commander of JNIM's "Macina Brigade," the Fulani Hamadou Kouffa; recently, however, the group's most visible persona has become Mahmoud Barry (alias Abu Yahya). He has appeared in a number of JNIM videos to articulate the group's ideology, activities, relations with Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS), and stance on negotiations, among other matters.

Barry's most recent video monologue was released by JNIM's al-Zallaqa media wing on January 18. In the video, Barry announced that JNIM supports Islamic scholars (*ulema*) who oppose secularism, or *laïcité*, which is the governing principle of the Malian state. This indicates how JNIM, unlike ISGS, is willing to establish alliances or at least comity with mainstream non-jihadist Muslim leaders if

they push for Mali to become an Islamic state ruled by sharia.

Barry nevertheless asserted in that video that joining the mujahideen in JNIM is the best way for Muslims, and especially the *ulema*, to establish sharia ([Twitter/@Sahelleaks](https://twitter.com/Sahelleaks), January 18). The message was particularly relevant in the Malian context because for the past several years the nation's most prominent Muslim scholar, Imam Mahmoud Dicko, has been trusted to oversee backdoor discussions between JNIM and the government. There have been few concrete results (orientxxi.info, May 18, 2020).

Prior to this recording, in July 2022, Barry also delivered another monologue in a video released by JNIM's al-Zallaqa media wing. There, he claims two assaults made against the Malian armed forces and promised further such attacks. ([Twitter/@Je_suis_le_Mali](https://twitter.com/Je_suis_le_Mali), July 28, 2022). He also vowed in Bambara language that "all of this [fighting] will not end until everyone accepts the application of sharia (fr.al-ain.com, July 28, 2022)." In an April 2022 video (also released by the al-Zallaqa media wing), Barry called for jihad and expressed the desire for Allah to support

the mujahideen, a common theme in his monologues ([Twitter/@ocisse691](https://twitter.com/ocisse691), April 26, 2022).

Barry's newfound role in these and other JNIM video monologues only came about because of his release from prison in an October 2020 hostage exchange. Soumaïla Cissé, an opposition political figure and the former Minister of Finance of Mali, was released in exchange for Barry and 200 other jihadists. Also released by JNIM was the 75-year old charity worker and the last remaining French hostage in the world at the time, Sophie Pétronin, alongside two Italian hostages (rfi.fr, October 9, 2020).

Soon after being freed, Barry then appeared in a JNIM video featuring a meeting between the group's top commanders. These included the blind, one-armed Algerian veteran explosives expert, Taher Abu Saad; Aliou Mahamane Touré, the former Islamic Police chief for Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) in Gao when al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and their allies controlled that territory; and Barry himself, who was then known as a commander of Katiba Macina ([Twitter/@MENASTREAM](https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM), October 10, 2020). Along with AQIM, MUJWA, and Tuareg-led Ansar al-Din and its Fulani sub-unit, Katiba Macina, occupied northern Mali in 2012.

Barry was initially arrested in July 2016 after participating in several major operations, including being among the masterminds of an attack that killed 17 Malian soldiers in Nampala one week earlier (jeuneafrique.com, July 27, 2016). That attack was attributed both to Ansar al-Din and Katiba Macina and preceded JNIM's formation in March 2017 by a year (voaafrique.com, July 27, 2016). Since returning to his jihadist brethren roughly five years after his initial arrest, however, Barry has now become more of an ideologue than a combatant on the battlefield.

Despite this, given the reclusiveness and high level of operational security of his

superiors in JNIM, Iyad ag Ghaly and Hamadou Kouffa, Barry has accepted the all-important role of being among the most frequently seen JNIM leaders in the group's videos. Therefore, he has also become a primary voice for al-Qaeda's strongest franchise in West Africa.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Militant Leadership Monitor.

A Portrait of Shahid Mehmood: Lashkar-e-Taiba's International Financier

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

Shahid Mehmood is a senior leader of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which is a Pakistan-based proscribed terrorist group. Mehmood has been affiliated with LeT since 2007 and previously served as the deputy chairman of Falah-i-Insaniat Foundation (FIF)—the humanitarian and fundraising arm of LeT (Indian Express, October 19). As head of FIF in Sindh province, Mehmood helped plan LeT's global operations, which extended to Myanmar, Bangladesh, Syria, Turkey, and Gaza, according to the U.S. Treasury Department (The Hindu, October 20). For example, in order to expand international recruitment into LeT, Mehmood travelled to a Burmese refugee camp in Bangladesh in August 2012. In 2014, he travelled to Syria and Turkey and was subsequently appointed to lead FIF operations in both countries (Indian Express, October 19). He has thus enhanced the group's capacity to carry out attacks in foreign countries, most notably the 2008 Mumbai attacks in India (aljazeera, June 28).

Terrorist Designation in the U.S. and India, but Not China

Mehmood was born in Karachi on April 10, 1980. After joining LeT, he associated with FIF in Karachi in 2012 and travelled to many countries and developed working relationships with international

organizations for LeT. As a result, in 2016, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Mahmood as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) ([Global fight against Terrorism Financing](#), January 16, 2017). This was because he was found to have facilitated terrorist attacks with LeT's top leadership. In August 2013, for example, he was identified as a LeT media wing member.

After designating Mahmood a terrorist in 2016, the U.S. also imposed sanctions on him and alleged that he was involved in terror attacks across in several countries, particularly in India ([Indian Express](#), October 19). Unsurprisingly, Mahmood is also a designated terrorist in India for his role in planning and executing attacks in that country, and is wanted by Indian investigative authorities in a terror funding case. He allegedly hatched a conspiracy to establish sleeper cells in New Delhi and Haryana under the cover of religious, charity, and welfare work on the instruction of LeT's top leader and founder, Hafiz Saeed. In 2020, Mahmood was subsequently placed on India's "most wanted" terrorist list ([The Hindu](#), October 20).

Besides Hafiz Saeed, Mahmood has long been a close associate of Sajid Mir, who is the brain behind the LeT's global terrorist operations. Mir, for example, planned and directed deadly attacks in several countries in the past two decades, the most well-known being the 2008 Mumbai attacks in India. In 2009, Mir also planned an attack on a Danish newspaper in retaliation for blasphemous cartoons of Prophet Muhammad they had published in 2005 ([Times of India](#), October 28, 2009).

In October 2022, however, China blocked a proposal by the U.S. and India to designate Mahmood as a global terrorist in the UN Security Council. This was the fourth time since June 2022 that Beijing blocked bids to blacklist Pakistan-based terrorists at the UN ([The Quint](#), October 25). This move to block the designation of Pakistan-based Mahmood as a global terrorist aided China's

strategic partner, Pakistan, in avoiding being put on a grey-list by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

Pakistan had been under scrutiny by the FATF for its failure to counter the financing of terrorism within its borders since 2018. To block the listing of Mahmood, China alleged there was insufficient evidence against him and sought more time to review the details of the potential listing. India responded by accusing Beijing of double standards and labelled its move to block the designation as "politically motivated" ([The Hindu](#), October 20).

Conclusion

M Mahmood is an important figure in the LeT, particularly in the areas of recruitment and fundraising. Under the guise of FIF, he expanded LeT's operations globally and played a key role in forging covert links with Islamic organizations in other countries, such as Bangladesh and Myanmar. Despite India's attempt to have Mahmood listed as a global terrorist by the UN, China came through on its all-weather friendship with Pakistan to rescue Islamabad from a potential-grey listing by the FATF.

The presence of operatives like Mahmood in LeT ensures a consistent supply of financial and human capital to LeT, allowing it to carry out its activities across the world. Although he is among the group's behind-the-scenes operatives, Mahmood's case reflects the geopolitics of LeT and terrorism designations more generally. The veto-holding major powers in the UN Security Council prioritize their own strategic interests in terrorism designation cases, rather than considering the designation proposal on the basis of evidence and merit. This geopolitical nature of decision-making has weakened the global campaign against terrorism and, in Mahmood's case, has enabled him to have more breathing room to operate and fundraise.

Syed Fazl-e-Haider is a contributing analyst at the South Asia desk of Wikistrat.

Abu Zachariah: Islamic State's Little-Known Leader in Southeast Asia

Daniele Garofalo

In March, Islamic State (IS)'s centralized media apparatus announced the selection of a new caliph, Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Quraysh, and IS provinces began disseminating photos and short videos to show pledges of allegiance to him ([al-Furqan Media](#), March 10). The Islamic State in East Asia Province (ISEAP) disseminated its own pledge through a photostream published March 11, showing at least two operational cells ([Amaq News Agency](#), March 11). On April 3, a seven-minute video was also released showing two ISEAP cells with at least 40 fighters swearing allegiance to the new IS leader ([Amaq News Agency](#), April 3).

On November 30, IS media announced the death of the aforementioned caliph following his roughly half-year term in leadership and appointed Abu al-Husayn al-Husseini al-Qurashi as his successor ([al-Furqan Media](#), November 30). On December 1, IS media began publishing photo and video reports of all the provinces and cells around the world pledging allegiance to the new caliph. ISEAP pledge images arrived after seventeen days—more than a week after all the other oaths. The photographs referenced only the Philippines areas (as opposed to their full range of their claims) and provided only four images, which showed a small group of ten fighters in addition to the speaker; this was unlike the previous pledges to caliphs, which displayed two large cells with over fifty fighters each ([Amaq News Agency](#), December 17).

In all ISEAP propaganda material, one never sees the faces of the speakers or cell leaders. Thus, very little has been known about ISEAP's own leader. Based on claims made in the past year, the group operates in the Philippines and Indonesia and has intentions to expand into other theatres,

such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. Nevertheless, ISEAP has a specific leader, according to information disseminated by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). This leader is Faharudin Hadji Satar (or Jer Mimbantas and Abu Bakar), but he is commonly referred to by his alias, "Abu Zachariah" ([Minda News](#), March 2).

Abu Zachariah's Path to Power

Abu Zachariah belongs to the MEMPANTAS clan, which is one of the main clans in the Philippine province of Lanao. He is a nephew of Alim Abdul Aziz Mimbantas, who was an important member of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) ([Benar News](#), March 3). This former Filipino rebel group is now collaborating with the government in Manila as provided for in the Bangsamoro Organic Law. [1] Abu Zachariah had problems with his clan because he decided to join the Maute Group, which had pledged allegiance to IS ([The Diplomat](#), June 1).

Despite these family issues, Abu Zachariah distinguished himself within the Maute Group during the long siege of Marawi in 2017 under Omar Maute's and Abdullah Maute's leadership. With Abu Sayyaf, then led by Isnilon Totoni Hapilon, the Mautes and their fighters besieged the Philippine city for over five months under the banner of IS. The two charismatic "Maute Brothers" were killed during the siege by Philippine government forces and other city commanders ([Benar News](#), October 16, 2017).

However, Abu Zar, the succeeding leader of the Maute Group, and Abu Zachariah managed to escape Marawi. They left shortly before the final assault by the Philippine army, with orders to gather reinforcements and establish a food supply route for the besieged ([Manila Times](#), March 3). The leader of ISEAP then became Abu Zar, who was also running several other local jihadist groups [2] until March 2019, when he was killed in a counter-terrorism operation. The leadership of ISEAP then passed to Abu Sayyaf leader

Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan, while Abu Zachariah became leader of the Maute Group, itself named after the two brothers killed during the siege of Marawi in 2017 ([Benar News](#), October 10, 2020).

Becoming ISEAP Leader on the Run

In July 2020, ISEAP leader Sawadjaan was killed in clashes with Philippine security forces ([Philippine News Agency](#), March 4). There was no news of any succession to the ISEAP leadership position or of Abu Zachariah until November 2020. At that time, the Philippine Security Forces in Lanao del Sur reported that seven relatives of Abu Zachariah, including his parents, had surrendered to government authorities and demanded that the leader of the Maute Group himself surrender ([Sunstar.com.ph](#), November 20, 2020).

Although no official note or statement from IS has been released since 2020, Abu Zachariah has been considered to be the leader of ISEAP for some time. Confirmation of his leadership finally was confirmed by the Philippine counter-terrorism forces who killed several ISEAP leaders in an operation in the town of Maging in Lanao del Sur in March 2022. Unfortunately, the operation failed to capture Abu Zachariah ([Benar News](#), March 2).

Abu Zachariah is still alive but on the run. This is known from a report released by the Philippine Army on December 12, 2022. In the report, the Philippine army announced the capture of an encampment of Maute Group holdouts in Marogong in Lanao del Sur, alongside war materiel and explosives they had cached there. Major General Roy Galido, head of the army's 6th Infantry Division, stated that intelligence reports confirmed that Abu Zacharia, the leader of IESAP, was in the Marogong area with about 30 of his fighters, but that once the military operation started and government forces reached the camp, the militants had all fled ([Philippines News Agency](#), December 13).

Conclusion

Since Abu Zachariah became ISEAP's leader, as part of both its economic warfare and war of attrition strategies the group has claimed to have perpetrated a total of 16 attacks in the Philippines and four others in Indonesia in 2021. From January to June 2022, ISEAP proceeded to conduct seven attacks in the Philippines ([Jihad Analytics](#), July 1). However, with Abu Zachariah's assumption of leadership, ISEAP's power center is now the Maute Group, which will have to face the challenge of managing the various local Filipino and Indonesian jihadist groups loyal to IS, such as Abu Sayyaf and Indonesian cells. In addition to increasing attacks, Abu Zachariah is focusing heavily on boosting recruitment, especially in the Marawi area among citizens disgruntled by the slow reconstruction of the city; other major recruiting grounds include the Balindong, Madalum, and Piagapo areas where there are many MILF camps ([Benar News](#), October 16, 2020). In MILF ranks there are also many heavily armed separatist militants who are dissatisfied with the Bangsamoro Organic Law that was signed with the Manila government. They too could become potential recruits.

The delay in ISEAP's renewal of the pledge of allegiance, the lack of dissemination of materials from several weeks of claims and attacks conducted by the group, and the recent news of counter-terrorism operations against ISEAP collectively suggest that the group is facing significant difficulties. It also reveals a leader on the run. Despite this, Abu Zachariah is a capable and veteran leader who operates in a territory that favors armed and clandestine struggle.

Abu Zachariah is also facing issues related to the diminishing influence of IS ideology in the region, with local insurgencies filling the vacuum IS's decline has left. He, therefore, needs to provide a sufficiently inspiring goal for all local jihadist and separatist groups to unite under his leadership. Strengthening ISEAP depends

heavily on the group's ability to evade counter-terrorism operations that have hit the group hard over the past two years. To survive, ISEAP will need to create long-term strategies to boost funding networks, military operations, and recruitment, while gaining local popular support, defending strongholds, and reviving the various armed groups loyal to IS in Indonesia and the Philippines. These groups have never disappeared, but, like Abu Sayyaf, they have suffered heavy losses and defeats over the past three years ([Terrorism Monitor](#), August 12).

Daniele Garofalo is a researcher and analyst of jihadist terrorism.

Notes

[1] This Philippine law ended the conflict between the Philippine government and the MILF and to establish the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). It also led to the disarmament of the MILF's military arsenal.

[2] Maute Group, Abu Sayyaf, a faction of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), Ansharul Khilafah Philippines, Dawlatul Islamiyah-Maguindanao, Dawlatul Islamiyah Waliyatul Masrik and Dawlatul Islamiyah-Torayfe Group.

The Bizarre Biography of Algerian Jihadist Meraghni "Akil" El-Hadj Ali

Dario Cristiani

Introduction

January 16, 2023 marked ten years since the attack at In Amenas gas facility in Algeria, which has been—and perhaps will long remain—the last major “systematic” jihadist attack that the country suffered ([Jeune Afrique](#), January 23, 2013). While jihadists belonging to both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) have remained active in Algeria, they have not been able to

replicate anything near the scale and impact of the In Amenas attack ([Radio France International](#), January 16, 2023). The jihadist threat in Algeria is not particularly severe currently, to the extent that Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has claimed that “terrorism is over in Algeria” ([Le Figaro](#), December 29, 2022). The latest issue of *El Djeich*, which is the official magazine of the Algerian army, further claimed a litany of significant counter-terrorism successes ([El Djeich, No. 714](#), January 2023).

Against this backdrop, 2023 in Algeria started with the January 3 public confession of Meraghni El-Hadj Ali, or “Akil,” an alleged Islamic State in the West Africa Province (ISWAP) member. On Algerian public television, he discussed his connections with IS and his journey as a jihadist in Syria to ISWAP's territories in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. This gained significant attention in Algeria and stirred debate in the media and newspapers about militancy, the risks of online recruitment, and the existence of external actors that want to strike Algeria to thwart its rise as a major regional power ([El Moudjahid](#), January 3; [Ennahar Online](#), January 3; [La Nouvelle République Algérie](#), January 4; [Le Carrefour D'Algérie](#), January 4; [L'Expression, Algérie](#), January 5).

From the Syrian Jihad to ISWAP

Akil was born in 1986 in El Oued, a province located in eastern Algeria between the Atlas Mountains and the Sahara Desert, near the border with Tunisia. According to his testimony, he entered Syria illegally in 2013 by traveling through Istanbul and Antakya, Turkey and then joined Ahrar al-Sham ([L'Expression, Algérie](#), January 5). Specifically, he became part of the “Nusrat Al-Mazloum (Supporters of the Oppressed),” which operated under the orders of the emir Abu Sofiane al-Jabalawi, and trained for about one month in the village of al-Kabir ([El Moudjahid](#), January 3). However, according to his confession, he soon became uneasy with the leaders of the movement, who he accused of being

“deceitful and materialistic” by considering jihad a business and caring more about their properties in Turkey than guiding young people to wage their jihad ([L'Expression, Algérie](#), January 5).

Akil started pretending to be sick in order to leave Syria and managed to receive permission to go for treatment in Turkey. Akil had all necessary documents to remain in Turkey, and stayed there for three months, working in a restaurant. He was planning to move to Europe, but instead returned to Algeria, where the security services arrested him in September 2013. He was charged with joining a terrorist organization abroad and sentenced to three years in jail ([El Moudjahid](#), January 3).

Once out of jail, Akil claimed he tried to live a normal life but soon fell victim to online recruitment when a “Tunisian contact” he met online persuaded him to join IS in what Algerian observers described as “a blatant example of the significant threat that the web poses to the security and stability of the society” ([La Nouvelle République Algérie](#), January 4). Akil then recounted that at the beginning of September 2022, he recorded a video to pledge allegiance to ISWAP’s leader in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. In the video, he also discussed how he explained to the ISWAP leaders what his plans were; Akil wanted to create a new group under ISWAP that was aimed at “targeting oil sites in the south [of Algeria] and senior state officials.” He also stated that his group had the idea to establish a safe contact area with the ISWAP members in the area of Tassili N'Ajjer in southeast Algeria ([Independent Arabia](#), January 6).

After this video, he then started preparing for operations by going to Algiers and contacting a person named Hamza Safsaf, who in the past had helped him smuggle a wanted individual across the borders with Libya ([Ennahar Online](#), January 3). Safsaf offered Akil the opportunity to carry out a terrorist attack in Algiers that would target eminent personalities to gain “maximum

media coverage.” However, Algerian security forces were monitoring his Facebook posts and intervened, capturing him ([Atalayar](#), January 5). At the end of the footage, Akil expressed his regrets and requested to be forgiven or, at least, to have a “commutation of his sentence.” He urged youngsters not to follow “this path which can only end in prison, death or bewilderment,” also urging “terrorists who have been involved with armed groups to drop armed action and surrender to the security services.”

Proving IS’s Weakness in Algeria?

Akil’s video confession is peculiar and partially bizarre because it seems like a staged attempt to not only show the efficacy of the security services, but also to serve as a warning for Algerians, and especially youngsters, who might be attracted by jihadist recruiters online. The most interesting aspect of the confession is that Akil claimed he joined ISWAP. According to the information available, Akil had no previous experiences with IS in Algeria.

In the years in which IS tried to establish a presence in Algeria, Akil was in prison most of the time. The actual Islamic State experience in Algeria has been limited, complicated, and above-all short-lived, due to the ruthless response from the authorities. This is because of the “eradication” mentality that has characterized the approach of the Algerian military since the 1990s to crack down on jihadist groups, including first and foremost the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). Thus, as soon as IS made its appearance in Algeria, the security forces reacted swiftly and destroyed its cells immediately ([Jeune Afrique](#), September 24, 2014).

In addition, in December 2014, Algerian special forces killed Abdelmalek Gouri near Boumerdes, which is 50 kilometers east of Algiers ([aljazeera](#), December 23, 2014). Gouri was a veteran of Algeria’s civil war and leader of Jund al-Khilafa, or “Soldiers of the Caliphate” group, which declared its

allegiance to the IS in September 2014. Therefore, Algerian security officials focused heavily on IS's Algeria Province because they feared it could gain traction. This strategy was successful, as IS militants found it difficult to operate in Algeria.

After this first crackdown, between 2014 and 2017, the Algerian security services also dismantled around 40 cells that were recruiting jihadists to join IS in Iraq and Syria ([Le Jeune Independent](#), March 18, 2017). Following the assassination of the French hostage Hervé Gourdel in September 2014, there was not another IS-claimed incident for three years. In February 26, 2017, however, a Bab El Kantara police station in Constantine, eastern Algeria was hit by a suicide bomber, injuring two police officers ([Le Point](#), March 2, 2017). However, the impact of the suicide bombing was minimal, and the group failed to strengthen its presence in Algeria. In these months, Akil was already out of prison, but it is unclear when he started becoming interested in IS activities through the Tunisian recruiter he met online.

As such, the idea that an Algerian like Akil would affiliate with ISWAP to conduct activities inside Algeria is unusual. On the one hand, it suggests that IS in Algeria is so weak that prospective members or recruits must join groups operating somewhere else like Nigeria. However, from this point of view, it is even stranger that Akil joined ISWAP and not, for instance, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which is based in the Sahel and theoretically should be the group that, for geographic outreach and historical evolution, would have Algeria among its targets and Algerians among its members.

Conclusion

The public confession of Akil has stirred a debate in Algerian media regarding online jihadist recruitment and the dangers linked to these activities. However, this confession also has a number of peculiar and in many aspects bizarre claims. Akil, after his first disappointing jihadist experience in Syria and the three years spent in jail in Algeria, fell victim again, joined IS, and pledged allegiance to ISWAP in September 2022. He was arrested after security forces intercepted his activities on Facebook. If true, his allegiance to ISWAP and ambition to operate in Algeria remain bizarre, but at best is a testament to the weakness of the IS network in Algeria and strength of the IS network in Nigeria.

Dario Cristiani is a Senior Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS) in Washington D.C.