



# MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

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#### **Abubakar Mainok: ISWAP's Sahel-Based Representative**

*Jacob Zenn*

The majority of Islamic State in West Africa Province's (ISWAP) top leaders have remained unknown since Abu Musab al-Barnawi—the son of the group's founder, Muhammed Yusuf—was deposed in 2019 ([france24.com](http://france24.com), March 15, 2019). Even after this, however, al-Barnawi remained in a leadership position, eventually commanding the May 2021 ISWAP offensive against his rival, Abubakar Shekau. This prompted Shekau's death, after he detonated a suicide vest while in negotiations with ISWAP's forces ([punchng.com](http://punchng.com), June 17, 2021). Abubakar Mainok, who had defected from Shekau's faction, is another important ISWAP leader. Al-Barnawi and Mainok are among the few known active ISWAP leaders at present, which makes profiling Mainok's current leadership responsibilities and rise in both Shekau's faction and ISWAP key to understanding the terrorist group's organizational structure and the "Boko Haram" movement more broadly.

Mainok shares his surname with a town in Borno State that ISWAP attacked in April 2021 ([dailypost.ng](http://dailypost.ng), April 25, 2021); his role in the group was revealed in June 2023 by the US government. The State Department claimed that "Abu Bakr ibn Muhammad ibn Ali al-Mainuki"—referring to Mainok's full name—was a senior leader of Islamic State's (IS) General Directorate of Provinces (GDP) "Sahel-based" al-Furqan Office ([state.gov](http://state.gov), June 8).

The State Department indicated that, despite being a Nigerian and member of ISWAP, Mainok was based in the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) strongholds in the Sahel, such as in Mali or Burkina Faso. From these areas, he worked closely with IS's central media apparatus called "Furqan." Until now, it has been unclear whether and/or to what extent ISWAP and ISGS maintain relations. The State Department's official designation suggests there are ties, at least in terms of media, between ISWAP and ISGS.

The two groups were organizationally both part of the same group—ISWAP—within IS's broader structure until 2021. However, this was understood to be a technicality; for all intents and purposes, ISWAP in the Lake Chad basin region and Nigeria was a

separate entity from the Sahel-based fighters known as ISGS. Thus, when IS proclaimed the creation of IS in Sahel Province (still commonly known as ISGS) in 2021, it only made official what analysts had previously suspected ([Twitter/@Minalami](https://twitter.com/Minalami), March 23).

Mainok's role in Shekau's faction, in ISWAP, and his alleged current role as a Sahel-based Furqan official means he maintains connections with IS's centralized media apparatus as well as ISWAP and ISGS. This also indicates that, despite ISGS becoming a separate entity from ISWAP officially, the two organizations maintain links. The relationship is similar to how Congo-based Islamic State in Central Africa province (ISCAP) and Islamic State in Mozambique Province formally separated in 2022 after having both been under the ISCAP umbrella, but have continued to maintain connections after the separation. However, in the case of ISCAP and Islamic State in Mozambique Province, feuds over finances and hierarchies in communications with IS's central leadership led to acrimony, which does not appear to be the case between with ISWAP and ISGS.

One reason why Mainok obtained a role as an interlocutor between IS's provinces in Nigeria and the Sahel is that in 2018, when he was still allied with Shekau—who had been ejected from ISWAP two years earlier for being too extreme—Mainok welcomed two Nigerian–Senegalese jihadists who wanted to fight in Nigeria. Similarly, as early as 2017, a defector from Shekau's faction called on Mainok and Shekau to refrain from their fratricidal violence with al-Barnawi and, in Shekau's case, to stop deploying girls as suicide bombers ([Sahara Reporters](#), December 24, 2017). According to the testimony of the Senegalese jihadists, who had been detained upon their return to Senegal, Mainok provided the militants with 6 million Nigerian naira (\$18,500) on behalf of Shekau. Eventually, however, Shekau's ruthlessness became too much for the Senegalese to bear; nevertheless, although Shekau threatened

to kill them, the group was allowed to leave Nigeria and return to Senegal. As Shekau was still loyal to IS, it is consistent that the Senegalese had been loyal to IS as well, with Mainok proving himself to be a capable mediator. Without his intervention, it is possible Shekau would have killed the Senegalese jihadists ([dakaractu.com](http://dakaractu.com), May 7, 2018).

In addition, Mainok has demonstrated himself to be a survivor. In September 2019, for example, Nigerian air force strikes reportedly killed Mainok on Lake Chad, but he evidently escaped ([thenigerianvoice.com](http://thenigerianvoice.com), September 20, 2019). Later, in June 2020, Mainok had apparently defected to ISWAP and abandoned Shekau and was reported to have become ISWAP's Minister of Finance ([Twitter@VincentFoucher](https://twitter.com/VincentFoucher), June 28, 2020). It is possible that the comparatively moderate al-Barnawi's ouster from ISWAP's top leadership made Mainok more interested in ISWAP, given that he had a reputation for being a hardliner, partly due to his willingness to stand by Shekau's side over the years. Nevertheless, in November 2022, Mainok was again said to have been killed alongside other ISWAP commanders in a rocket attack by the Nigerian military, but this too appears to have been incorrect ([Twitter/@Zagazolamakama](https://twitter.com/Zagazolamakama), November 6, 2022). In contrast, the State Department's official designation shows Mainok has remained close to the hardline ISGS leadership and IS central media apparatus and will, therefore, ensure that ISWAP itself remains relatively hardline, compared with its more moderate period under al-Barnawi.

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## **Rising Trend of Female Suicide Bombers in Baluchistan: Examining the Case of Samia Qalandarani**

*Farhan Zahid*

Women have played multifaceted roles in terrorist organizations since the advent of modern terrorism. The militant landscape of Pakistan is no different. In the recent past, Islamist terrorist organizations, such as Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), have fielded women in terrorist attacks in Pakistan ([NACTA](#), 2019). However, in nationalist-separatist movements in Pakistan, the involvement of women is a comparatively new phenomenon. This makes the case of Samia Qalandarani particularly noteworthy.

### **Samia's Suicide Attack**

On June 24, Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), a Baluch nationalist-separatist organization, perpetrated a suicide attack in Turbat district involving a female suicide bomber. The target was a convoy of senior intelligence officers, who were on an official tour of the region. **[1]**

The delegation landed at Turbat airport 30 minutes before the suicide attack. They had intended to be taken to the district intelligence headquarters from the airport. **[2]** As far as intelligence matters are concerned, this represented a major compromise of operational security. Such official tours are highly secretive and only a handful of people know about the routes and meetings, but somehow the BLA was able to learn of the plan ahead of time.

The convoy was struck near a downtown roundabout in Turbat city, and as a result two others were injured and one nearby police officer in his vehicle was killed ([Dawn](#), June 24). As the investigation progressed, it surfaced that the suicide bomber was a young girl named Samia Qalandarani Baluch. In a press release, BLA spokesperson Jeeyand Baluch quickly

claimed responsibility for the suicide attack and clarified that their target had been the military convoy, not the police patrol vehicle.

### **Who was Samia Qalandarani?**

25-year old Samia Qalandarani was born in Tootak village of Khuzdar District of Baluchistan Province. She hailed from a Baluch nationalist family; her father, Obaidullah Qalandarani, was a staunch supporter of the Baluch nationalist movement. She was also educated, and joined BLA seven years ago. Qalandarani received training at a BLA training camp, and would then remain part of the group's media wing for five years.

Furthermore, she volunteered to become a suicide bomber right after the death of her fiancé. **[3]** Her fiancé was Rehan Baluch, who himself became the BLA's first ever suicide bomber when he targeted Chinese engineers in the Dalbandin area of Chagi District of Baluchistan Province in August 2018 ([Arab News](#), August 11, 2018). Qalandarani's father-in-law, Aslam Baluch (alias Achu), also was the founder and leader of the Majeed Brigade, which is the BLA's *fidayeen* (suicide squad). Aslam was killed in Kandahar, Afghanistan in December 2018 ([Al Jazeera](#), December 27, 2018). After laying the foundations for the Majeed Brigade, Aslam first presented his own son, Rehan, to become the first suicide bomber of the Majeed Brigade. **[4]**

Samia Qalandarani was not the first Baluch woman to join the ranks of the Majeed Brigade for the purposes of conducting a suicide bombing. Prior to this incident, in April 2022, Shari Baluch (alias Bramsh) was a part of a suicide bombing in Karachi that killed three Chinese citizens ([BBC Asia](#), April 26, 2022). Shari was a primary school teacher and hailed from a middle-class Baluch family. After that incident, intelligence reports predicted that more Baluch females would join the Majeed Brigade to sign up for suicide attacks. These reports also revealed that some Baluch women were detained by security

forces in Turbat District on suspicion of potential links with the Majeed Brigade and the possibility of their becoming suicide bombers ([Aaj English](#), May 16, 2022). Thus, while the security forces seemed to have been on the trail of Samia Qalandarani, they were unable to stop her suicide operation.

## Conclusion

The involvement of women in Baluch nationalist-separatist movements, and especially in suicide attacks, is a matter of grave concern in Pakistan. If not taken seriously by Pakistani security policymakers, then this tactic may prolong the militant campaign of nationalist-separatist movements in Baluchistan province. Pakistan could respond by establishing a specially designated counter-violent extremism program directed at women in Baluchistan, but this does not appear to be on the table at present.

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## Notes:

[1] Discussions with a senior journalist in Islamabad on July 4, 2023.

[2] Discussions with a senior police officer who requested for anonymity on July 4, 2023.

[3] Discussions with a journalist based in Islamabad on July 4, 2023.

[4] Discussions with a senior journalist based in Islamabad on July 4, 2023.

## Al-Bara al-Shishani: Chechen Leader of Liwa al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar in Syria

*Daniele Garofalo*

There are numerous jihadist groups in Syria, some of which host or are comprised of foreign fighters from Russia and Central Asia among their ranks. Many fighters from Russia and Central Asia chose the Syrian Civil War as their theater of operations around 2012, and began to be seen in larger numbers around 2015. The turning point was in 2014, when Russia decided to intervene on the side of Bashar al-Assad's regime.

One of the groups to emerge in Syria during those years is known today as Liwa al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (LMA), or "Brigade of Emigrants and Supporters." LMA is integrated militarily into Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) Liwa Said ibn Zayd (Said ibn Zayd Brigade). [1] The current emir of LMA is Abdullah al-Daghestani, who is often depicted in photos guarding checkpoints in *ribat* (fortresses), while the military emir is al-Bara al-Shishani. In most cases, very little is known about these leaders, who are always shown in photos with their faces blurred.

However, through monitoring their online channels and conducting direct interviews of those who know al-Shishani, it has been possible to draw a profile of his key attributes as a jihadist leader of Russian-origin in Syria.

## Who is al-Bara al-Shishani?

Al-Bara al-Shishani [2] is a Chechen jihadist commander and veteran of the Second Chechen War. He joined the armed struggle against Russia in 2007 "to defend my land, as my religion Islam obliged me to do..." Within the Russian-Chechen conflict, al-Shishani quickly rose through the ranks due to his charisma and military abilities.

Al-Shishani recounts in his media channels how he gained respect and recognition by leading numerous ambushes on the Russian army. In addition, al-Shishani is an avid student of military tactics and strategy, which has led him to frequently operate as a trainer; he often quotes Napoleon Bonaparte, Alexander the Great, and Sun Tzu in his channels. [3] In 2012, al-Shishani left Chechnya for an “undercover mission,” which ended in 2013 when he joined other Chechen fighters to fight in Syria against Bashar al-Assad’s government on the Kassab front in the Latakia Governorate.

Meanwhile, Chechens, as well as Dagestani and Georgian Muslims—who had fought in the Chechen and Georgian wars against Russia—founded the “Muhajireen Battalion” under the command of Abu Omar al-Shishani in 2012 ([Enab Baladi](#), July 15, 2016). In March 2013, the Muhajireen Battalion merged with two Syrian jihadist groups, Jaish Muhammad and Kata’ib Khattab, to form Jaish Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA). It was at this time that al-Bara al-Shishani joined JMA. In an online statement released at the end of November 2013, Abu Omar al-Shishani finally pledged allegiance to Abubakr al-Baghdadi and decided to join Islamic State (IS) ([Zaman al-Wasl](#), February 16, 2014).

### **Al-Shishani’s Evolution After the JMA Split**

JMA suffered a split, with hundreds of members siding with Abu Omar al-Shishani and joining IS, while the original group began cooperating with al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra. Those on the latter half of the break actively participated in offensives in Idlib and Aleppo against the Syrian army and its allies in 2013 and 2014 ([Al-Araby](#), May 24, 2014). In September 2015, JMA officially allied itself with Jabhat al-Nusra ([Al-Akhbar](#), September 24, 2015). Al-Bara al-Shishani stood out in Syria just as he had in his numerous battles in Chechnya, becoming known in particular for his ability to lead and conduct special operations behind enemy lines. Al-Shishani also

demonstrated proficiency with long distance sniping operations; in some of his online posts, al-Shishani is shown in photos with modified sniper rifles, shooting at enemies from a distance of two kilometers.

This military prowess allowed al-Shishani to climb the ranks in JMA, becoming the deputy of its military leader, Mansur al-Daghestani. In 2015, al-Shishani then became famous after a video was released that showed him storming and conquering Bsanqul Hill in the Idlib Governorate with a handful of men, and later liberating the nearby town from regime forces. On January 28, 2017, JMA became a member group of HTS and the “al-Fateh al-Mubin Operations Room” under the name Liwa Said ibn Zayd. JMA also changed its name to LMA, despite maintaining independent Russian-language propaganda on the advice of al-Bara al-Shishani and the current emir, Abdullah al-Daghestani. This was due to the fact that most of the viewers of their propaganda on social networks and messaging platforms are Russian-speaking fighters and supporters. [4]

With HTS, LMA fought in all campaigns in the northwestern Syrian governorates of Idlib and Hama between late 2017 and the middle of 2019. In early 2019, a video hailed al-Shishani for capturing al-Hamamiyat Hill in Idlib Governorate, despite being under bombardment from the Russian air strikes. In 2019, Mansur al-Daghestani was killed in battle. LMA fighters quickly elected al-Bara al-Shishani as the new military emir by a general vote. Al-Bara al-Shishani then decided that once he became emir, he would establish a unit called Chechen Tactical within the LMA, through which he would use his charisma and military expertise to train new members and support (via training) other groups aligned with the HTS’s operations room.

Al-Shishani has since appeared in some videos with Hawk Ayuub al-Uzbeki, who is the leader of Muhojir Tactical ([The Khorasan Diary](#), May 2). Al-Uzbeki is also a member of the Uzbek jihadist group,

Tavhid vo Jihad Uzbek, which is operating in Syria ([Akhbar al-Aan](#), February 26). As the second most important figure in the group, [5] al-Uzbeki performed several tasks, such as overseeing the preparation of LMA's military units, supervising training, and controlling equipment, weapons, and ammunition stocks.

## Conclusion

Both in his channels and in interviews, al-Shishani has explained that LMA's current goals are: overthrowing the regime of Bashar al-Assad, defeating its allies, such as Russia and Iran, and establishing a government that rules by sharia law. In the last year, al-Shishani has often been asked about the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the possibility of reopening a jihadist front in the Caucasus. He has repeatedly replied that, at present, "there is no possibility of bringing jihad to the Caucasus," but *were* Russia to collapse, "then we must be ready." He also criticized Abdul Hakim al-Shishani for submitting to Zakayev [6] in the ranks of the Republic of Ichkeria (the Chechen government in exile), as well as Zakayev's choice to fight alongside the Ukrainian army ([Akhbar al-Aan](#), March 6). In al-Shishani's opinion, "Ichkeria is my homeland, which needs to be liberated" but "one should not become a soldier of the armed forces of Ukraine," asserting that "Zakayev is unreliable, a liar and has carried out actions contrary to Islam."

More locally, within the ranks of the HTS and in the security of the territories under HTS control, the LMA is growing in quantity and quality. As military emir of the LMA, al-Shishani has repeatedly emphasized both the military competence of his fighters and the numerical increase in the group's ranks. In Syria, LMA's military emir has very strong ties with HTS and other groups composed of foreign fighters, in particular Uzbek, Albanian, and Uyghur fighters. These are all well-trained, well-armed, and well-established militants with widespread (and expanding) logistical networks, who

have not given up their long-term goal of returning to fight in their homelands.

Although al-Shishani criticized Zakayev and Abdul Hakim al-Shishani, he did not hide his future desire to return to Chechnya and resume the armed struggle to liberate the North Caucasus. For al-Shishani, Syria is only an intermediate stage, where he lies waiting for the right opportunity; in the meantime, he trains, replenishes his ranks, and creates links and alliances. Al-Shishani's ultimate goal, therefore, remains overthrowing Russian-rule in the Caucasus.

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## Notes:

[1] The name of this HTS brigade is dedicated to Sa'īd ibn Zayd, who was one of the Ten Companions of the Prophet Muhammad. He was also a cousin and brother-in-law of the Second Caliph, Umar bin al-Khattab.

[2] The information on the military emir of LMA was obtained by the author from the studying and monitoring of the emir's channels, from an interview conducted by the author with al-Shishani in January 2023, and from interviews and private chats conducted with him between February and April 2023.

[3] Statements on his private channels on Telegram and Instagram.

[4] As communicated by the military emir of LMA in an interview conducted by the author and available on Daniele Garofalo Monitoring:

<https://danielegarofalo.substack.com/p/interview-with-al-bara-al-shishani>. Members of the group and followers of its media are mostly Caucasian (Chechen, Dagestani, Ingush), Tatar, Tajik, Azerbaijani, Uzbek, Kazakh, and Ukrainian.

[5] The group's leadership structure consists of a military leadership, a sharia

committee, a Shura council, and a media arm. The group operates in the governorates of Latakia, Aleppo, and Idlib and consists of 400-500 fighters.

**[6]** Akhmed Zakayev was Minister of Culture in 1994 and Minister of Foreign Affairs in both 1997 and 2006 for the Chechen separatist government of Ichkeria. During the First Chechen War, he participated in the violent battle for Grozny and high-level negotiations with Russia in 1997. In 2000, after being wounded in battle in Grozny against the Russians, he moved abroad for treatment; after the end of the Second Chechen War, he became the first spokesman and then president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in exile.

## **A Postmortem Profile of Senior ISIS Leader Usama al-Muhajir**

*Rami Jameel*

US Central Command (CENTCOM) issued a statement on July 9 to announce that it killed an Islamic State (IS) leader in eastern Syria two days earlier. This leader, Usama al-Muhajir, **[1]** was killed in an air strike conducted by an MQ9 drone ([centcom.mil](http://centcom.mil), July 9). This was the same drone that was harassed by Russian airplanes in an incident that attracted world attention only days before al-Muhajir was killed ([baladi-news.com](http://baladi-news.com), July 8). Indeed, the Russian airplane incident attracted more headlines in the international press than the killing of al-Muhajir.

Al-Muhajir was the IS commander of eastern Syria, but he was killed near the city of al-Bab in northwestern Syria. He was the latest in a series of IS senior figures to be killed in northwestern Syria in an area controlled by rival Syrian opposition groups. There is bitter animosity and differences in strategic calculations between the Sunni Syrian opposition groups that dominate the country's northwest—the only part of Syria where the local Sunni Arab community is not under the rule of non-Sunni authorities.

This might have made it possible for IS figures to seek refuge and try to blend in within the community there ([annahar.com](http://annahar.com), July 9).

The killing of al-Muhajir, and other IS leaders before him, indicates the immense pressure and major losses that IS has been suffering. Paradoxically, it also shows the group's resistance and the changing way it now operates in Syria. IS seems to have adapted fairly quickly to this new era, where it has lost almost all of its former senior leadership from when Abubakar al-Baghdadi was caliph. Despite frequently losing top- and mid-level leaders, IS nevertheless still operates and even adopts new strategies in Syria. For example, IS has been found filtering into areas controlled by rival Sunni militant groups, even reportedly reaching agreements with their Shia foes in order to focus on targeting the US and its allies ([npasyria.com](http://npasyria.com), June 20).

IS has been rebuilding its network in the group's previous stronghold in eastern Syria, and al-Muhajir was in charge of that task. Moreover, IS has been increasingly active in the vast Syrian desert ([syriapostnews.com](http://syriapostnews.com), March 22). Even in the northwest (where IS's rivals are in control) the group continues to maintain a small but significant presence. This reflects IS's hope that potential geopolitical changes, such as the potential withdrawal of Turkey or the US from the region, might bring about opportunities for an IS revival in both northwestern and northeastern Syria—and possibly beyond ([7al.net](http://7al.net), February 3).

### **Al-Muhajir's Role in IS**

As IS commander in charge of eastern Syria, al-Muhajir oversaw the part of Syria that had once been IS's main stronghold in the days when it controlled and ruled large swaths of Syria and Iraq. Currently, however, eastern Syria is under the control of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic forces (SDF), which are supported by the US. The fact that al-

Muhajir was living in northwestern Syria, an area controlled by the Syrian Sunni opposition, indicates that IS still does not have the ability to have command bases in its former heartland in the east ([syria.news](#), April 25).

Al-Muhajir was also known by other aliases, such as Humam al-Shami, Humam al-Khidher, and Abu Anas. These different aliases obscured his identity, especially while he was living a calm life with his wife and undertaking simple jobs like many other displaced Syrians who found refuge in the northwest. Even so, after his death local sources revealed some previously unknown biographical details about al-Muhajir. He was 30 years old when he was killed, and he came originally from the mountainous region of al-Qalamoun in western Syria, near the border with Lebanon. He later lived in al-Hasaka Province in northeastern Syria ([akhbaralaan.net](#), July 28).

Al-Muhajir was killed in the village of Zara'a near al-Bab in Aleppo province. Intelligence provided by the SDF has proven crucial in targeting IS leaders. That notwithstanding, al-Bab is in an area controlled by Turkish-backed Syrian Sunni Arab rebels. There was apparently some critical intelligence cooperation on the ground that helped the operation to kill al-Muhajir succeed. Not only was al-Muhajir's location spotted, but also his course of movement; he was struck travelling on a highway on a motorcycle ([skynewsarabia.com](#), July 9).

### **Caliphs Killed**

Northwestern Syria evidently became the refuge of senior IS leaders as the group lost its stronghold in eastern Syria and neighboring Iraq. With the exception of IS's third caliph, Abu al-Hassan al-Qurashi—who was killed almost accidentally in clashes between Syrian rebel groups in Daraa in southern Syria—other prominent IS figures were killed in northwestern Syria ([al-arabiya.net](#), December 1, 2022).

IS's first caliph, Abubakr al-Baghdadi, was killed in 2019 in a US operation in northwestern Syria ([aljazeera.net](#), October 27, 2019). His successor, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi, was also killed in a US raid in 2022 in that same region ([addustour.com](#), February 4, 2022). Northwestern Syria consists roughly of two areas, based on who has power: The first section is Idlib Governorate, which is controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The backbone of HTS is the former organization of Jabhat al-Nusra, which was for years al-Qaeda's branch in Syria. However, since controlling Idlib in 2017, Jabhat al-Nusra's leader, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, has significantly changed his group's ideology and even the group's name, which became Fatah al-Sham and then eventually HTS. He also severed ties with al-Qaeda's global network and claimed his militant organization now identifies as a localized "Syrian" group ([aljazeera.net](#), April 28).

Both of IS's first two caliphs were killed in areas controlled by al-Julani's fighters, but without any interference or known cooperation between HTS and the US. HTS was rumored to have tried to cooperate in the killing of al-Muhajir, however. In April, the US killed another prominent IS leader in HTS areas, Ahmad Ayad al-Jabouri, who was in charge of IS operations in Europe. Al-Julani and his forces, which are the largest and most unified Sunni opposition group, have been designated as terrorists by the US for some time. As such, the US does not deal with them. The ultimate goal of al-Julani's strategy, however, is to reverse that designation and to be recognized as a legitimate opposition force internationally ([jusoor.co](#), February 8, 2021). The killing of al-Muhajir revived the suggestions from Syrians that al-Julani has been cooperating with the US. No evidence has been provided to support that claim except geographical proximity to key past IS killings. However, there were reports that al-Muhajir had lived in HTS areas before having to move to the al-Bab area, where he was killed ([akhbaralaan.net](#), July 28).



The killing of al-Muhajir took place in another area of northwestern Syria, which is controlled by Turkey and Turkish-backed rebel groups. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan also announced in April that Turkish forces had killed IS's fourth caliph, Abu al-Hussein al-Qurashi, in an operation in the Turkish-controlled area in Syria ([arabi21.com](http://arabi21.com), May 1). If true, this was the most significant Turkish strike on IS leadership to date, and the killing of al-Muhajir shows an increasing focus from Turkey and its Syrian allies on IS. This is in spite of the fact that Turkey considers Kurdish rebels in both Turkey and Syria to be the main threat to its national security. Al-Muhajir was detained by the local Turkish-backed militia which controlled the town he last lived in. Al-Muhajir was reportedly interrogated and his phone and computer were temporarily confiscated and searched. He was later released without charges, but after his killing there have been suggestions that information about him was shared with Turkey (and probably the US) afterwards ([akhbaralaan.net](http://akhbaralaan.net), July 28).

### **Shifting Alliances**

Abu al-Hussein was declared IS caliph in November 2022, after the killing of his predecessor in Daraa, southern Syria. He is believed to have only spent a few months as caliph. More significantly he was not from the IS "old guard" that had been present and active with the group's first caliph, al-Baghdadi. Rather, Abu al-Hussein had joined the group relatively late, in 2013 ([aljazeera.net](http://aljazeera.net), May 2).

This new generation of IS leadership has been operating under immense pressure, but they seem to have managed to continue operating, even introducing new initiatives. The prominent Syrian opposition platform, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), for example, published a bombshell report claiming that Iran and Iranian-backed militias had made a secret deal with IS in 2021. According to the deal, Iran and its allies would support IS in its focus to orient its operations

around striking US and US-backed forces (namely, the SDF) in eastern Syria. In return, IS would reduce attacks against Iran and its allies in the Syrian desert, where the latter has to maintain long supply lines ([syriahr.com](http://syriahr.com), July 14).

The SOHR report was not verified by other sources, but is worth considering. IS had famously reached an agreement with Lebanese Hezbollah in 2017 to evacuate IS fighters and families from areas adjacent to Lebanon into eastern Syria, where the group had still controlled some areas at the time ([alwatannews.net](http://alwatannews.net), August 30, 2017). This reported agreement with Iran would, however, suggest that Iran and IS were willing to coordinate with one another to a significantly higher level than previously believed.

### **Conclusion**

IS has increasingly suffered major losses in its leadership in Syria. This has been strategically negative for IS, because both the group's symbolic and actual leadership remains in Syria, despite the fact that most of its strength is currently elsewhere in the world; most of IS's power today lies with its franchise groups, such as Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). This does not mean that IS has vanished in Syria. On the contrary, it has shown some resilience under the tremendous pressure of the US and other opposed powers ([alaraby.co.uk](http://alaraby.co.uk), May 15).

In Iraq, where most IS leaders originally hail from, the group is facing a more difficult time than Syria. Iraqi forces and Iran-backed Shia militias have gained overwhelming control across Sunni areas that were once IS strongholds. Syria is still more chaotic than Iraq, which offers IS some leeway. IS has mainly resorted to the desert of central and eastern Syria, which extends to western Iraq and parts of Jordan. The reports about a possible agreement between Iran and IS would indicate that IS is strategically changing under younger leaders like al-Muhajir—and that they still matter. Indeed, under Usama

al-Muhajir's tenure as an IS commander in eastern Syria, the group managed to avoid total annihilation. The group even managed to launch operations, including the attack on al-Sinaa prison in Hasaka in 2022 ([elaph.com](http://elaph.com), February 2, 2022). Said operation was reportedly a result of the cooperation with Iran, which led IS to regain its ability to operate deep behind the enemy lines ([syriahr.com](http://syriahr.com), July 14).

While Russia's harassment of a US drone could not stop the US operation to kill al-Muhajir, it was a stark reminder of the complexities of having multiple state and non-state actors in Syria, as well as the impact of these issues on US national security. In addition to Russia, which remains the main international backer of the Syrian government, one must also consider Iran, whose network of Shia militias are deployed across Syria. Other powers are also pursuing strategies to deal with US counter-IS strategies. Prominent among those are HTS and Turkey (as well as Turkish-aligned Syrian opposition groups). Cooperation between different parties in the field was reportedly vital in the killing of al-Muhajir, and this was probably the case in the operations that killed other IS leaders as well. Nevertheless, without clear terms of cooperation or protocols in place, the US's strategy to cripple IS in Syria will still be prone to setbacks or strategic outmaneuvering by opponents, especially if new IS leaders after al-Muhajir's generation show more pragmatism in finding allies that are interested in defying US counter-terrorism objectives.

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**Notes:**

**[1]** Usama al-Mujahir is not to be confused with Abu Usama al-Muhajir, who was an IS leader in Yemen that Saudi Arabia claimed to have captured in 2019 ([aawsat.com](http://aawsat.com), June 9, 2019).