



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

p.1

Brief

Jacob Zenn

p.2

Abdallah Ag Albakaye:
JNIM's Tuareg Emir in
Mali's Gao Region

Aman Bezdeh

p.4

Abu al-Hussein: A Post-
Mortem of Islamic State's
Previous Caliph

Rami Jameel

p.6

Qari Fasihuddin Fitrat:
The Afghan Taliban's
Tajik "Commander of
the North"

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

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Abuwakas: The Arab–Tanzanian Face of Islamic State's Jihad in the Congo

Jacob Zenn

On July 28, the European Union (EU) sanctioned Ahmad Mahmood Hassan (alias Abuwakas) for terrorist activities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (europa.eu, July 28). The EU claimed Abuwakas, a Tanzanian national, was born around 1993 and is a "senior leader of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a non-governmental armed group operating in Uganda and the Eastern DRC." The ADF is the predecessor group for Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP); having been subsumed by ISCAP, the ADF has more or less disappeared (allafrica.com, October 26, 2021).

According to the EU, Abuwakas' responsibilities include "command of a camp, training of recruits, production of bombs, online outreach, and rapprochement" with Islamic State (IS) central leadership. The most visible evidence of ISCAP's ties to IS's leadership is the media collaboration between the two organizations. For example, IS claimed responsibility for a major 2022 ISCAP

prison break in Beni with such speed and detail that it was likely that IS provided advice for (and had advance knowledge of) the operation beforehand (africanews.com, August 10, 2022). The EU alleged that Abuwakas has been directly involved in other attacks, including a January 15 raid on Beni and an April 7, 2022 bombing of a military camp in Goma which killed six people and injured sixteen others (africanews.com, April 8, 2022).

Nevertheless, Abuwakas is perhaps best known for his appearance in 2017 in one of the first videos of the group that would become ISCAP, in which he stated that he was in the "Islamic State in Central Africa" (dailymail.co.uk, October 18, 2017). As Abuwakas is of Arab descent, he looked different than most other Congolese fighters; likewise, he spoke Arabic. Within two years of this video, in 2019, IS announced that the IS-loyal jihadists in Mozambique and the Congo were part of the newly formed ISCAP. This indicated that the Abuwakas video—alongside increasing attacks by militants in both countries—gave IS enough confidence in the jihadist group to give it the status of an IS "province."

Uganda followed the EU designation of Abuwakas by issuing its own announcement that the militant had ordered the June raid on Mpondwe-Lhubiriha Secondary School in Kasese District, Uganda (themonitor.co.ug, July 31). The raid led to the deaths of 38 students and has been attributed to ISCAP, as it is the only known group in that area with the capability and ideological willingness to carry out such a brutal attack (theeastafrika.co.ke, August 4). Nevertheless, ISCAP did not claim the attack—possibly because IS, which coordinates with ISCAP on media strategy, viewed the school massacre as beyond the pale even for IS, and harmful for IS's reputation globally.

Ugandan officials have shared seemingly little evidence so far that would prove that Abuwakas had a role in the school attack. However, since the 2017 video, which was reported on widely and spread throughout jihadist social media channels, Abuwakas has become one of the most well-known faces of ISCAP. Abuwakas plays dual roles for ISCAP, acting both as a leader with practical responsibilities and as a "bogeyman." Governments like Uganda's can pin ISCAP's brutal violence on Abuwakas without addressing the wider network, going after a known face when they seek to hold ISCAP accountable despite only arresting a few individuals for such attacks.

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Abdallah Ag Albakaye: JNIM's Tuareg Emir in Mali's Gao Region

Aman Bezdeh

Abdallah Ag Albakaye holds a prominent position within Mali-based Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) as its emir in Talataye. The village of Talataye is in Gao, but is strategically located between the

Menaka and Kidal regions. Ag Albakaye originally belonged to the JNIM sub-group, Ansar al-Din, and hails from the Dawsahak pastoralist Tuareg clan, which predominantly inhabits the Gao and Menaka regions. He is also a former member of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) (Libération, May 5, 2021).

The secular MNLA movement led the Tuareg rebellion in 2012—before the rebellion was hijacked and the MNLA became side-lined by jihadists. Ag Albakaye has since been described by French soldiers as "extremely cautious" with "very little mobility" (France info, May 17). In addition, he has emerged not only as a notable field commander in Gao, but also as the militant responsible for the capture of French journalist Olivier Dubois.

Field Commander in Gao

Ag Albakaye has played a key role in recruiting Dawsahak and other Tuareg tribesmen into the ranks of JNIM. Additionally, he has been identified as an improvised explosive device (IED) specialist (UN Security Council, August 8, 2018). He was also a liaison between JNIM and Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS), although the exact nature of his activities in this role remains unclear (Jeune Afrique, August 30, 2018). When he was a liaison in 2018, clashes between the two groups were not as intense as they have become since.

France's "Operation Barkhane," a 2014 extension of "Operation Serval," had Ag Albakaye on its radar. The new counter-terrorism effort targeted and successfully eliminated significant figures, including former al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) leader Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud (alias Abdelmalek Droukdel), as well as JNIM commanders Bah Ag Moussa, Almansour Ag Alkassoum, and Yahya Abu Hammam (alias Djamel Okacha) (RFI, June 11, 2020). Additionally, Operation Barkhane targeted and eliminated Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, the founder of ISGS

([The Africa Report](#), September 22, 2021). Despite these successes, Ag Albakaye survived, and he is now known as the group's most recent emir in the Gao Region.

After France's unsuccessful attempts to locate and eliminate Ag Albakaye, he resurfaced in the village of Talataye, which has been under his rule and had witnessed intense battles in the past between ISGS and JNIM. In September 2022, however, ISGS took control of Talataye ([APA news](#), September 19, 2022). This was reversed in July 2023, when JNIM claimed to have recaptured the town, though JNIM did not specify Ag Albakaye's role in the effort ([Imangahdien](#), July 21).

The Dubois Kidnapping

In 2021, French journalist Olivier Dubois, who had been based in Gao, Mali since 2015, arranged a discreet meeting with Ag Albakaye in Talataye through a fixer. The meeting was organized without the knowledge of the French forces in the country. However, unbeknownst to Dubois, his fixer was also an informant for Operation Barkhane, and was specifically recruited to locate Ag Albakaye so that French troops could capture him ([RFI](#), May 16).

On April 8, 2021, Dubois left Gao to travel to Talataye for the meeting, but he was asked midway through the journey to proceed alone. This meant that he left his fixer behind. Upon reaching the destination to meet Ag Albakaye, Dubois was then taken hostage ([RFI](#), May 16). An investigation into the incident was launched following the kidnapping of Dubois. It revealed that Operation Barkhane had attempted to use Dubois's work, through his fixer, to locate Ag Albakaye. Subsequently, however, the French deemed any operation to capture Ag Albakaye too risky, and abandoned the idea. This left Dubois to his fate, becoming a hostage for almost two years; this was despite the fact that he travelled to Talataye only after receiving an invitation

letter signed by Ag Albakaye, which had guaranteed Dubois safety and financing for his trip ([RFI](#), May 16).

A few days before Dubois's release in March, AQIM emir Youssef al-Annabi confirmed to France 24 that JNIM was holding Dubois. However, he denied any invitation from Ag Albakaye to Dubois to visit the jihadist in Talataye ([France 24](#), March 6). Al-Annabi asserted that Ag Albakaye, therefore, did not lure the journalist to himself and was not involved in the kidnapping ([RFI](#), May 16). After Dubois was released in March, he provided details about his daily life during captivity and revealed that he was held in Kidal instead of Gao. He made no mention of Ag Albakaye by name, but indicated that the captors spoke Tamashaq, a variety of Ag Albakaye's native Tuareg language, and Arabic ([Le Point](#), March 23).

Conclusion

Operation Barkhane ended in August 2022 ([Le Monde](#), August 16, 2022). It successfully eliminated several high-ranking JNIM commanders. However, Ag Albakaye managed to evade efforts at his capture or elimination. This makes Ag Albakaye one of the last JNIM veterans originally from Ansar al-Din who remains connected and influential on the ground in Mali.

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Abu al-Hussein: A Post-Mortem of Islamic State's Previous Caliph

Rami Jameel

Islamic State (IS) caliph Abu al-Hussein al-Qurashi was killed in northwestern Syria, IS's third leader overall to be killed in the last 18 months. The role of the caliph is by definition central in the historic system of Islamic rule, the caliphate, which IS

claimed to reintroduce in 2014. As such, losing leaders at this rate has thrown IS into a major crisis. However, the group declared that it has selected a new caliph, Abu Hafs al-Hashimi, pledging that it will continue to fight (aljazeera.net, August 3).

Abu al-Hussein's Demise

On April 30, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that the IS leader was killed in a Turkish operation inside neighboring Syria. Three months later, IS's new spokesman admitted losing Abu al-Hussein, but disputed the Turkish version of the story. Instead, the spokesman accused IS's main rival jihadist group in Syria, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), of killing the IS leader—handing over both the body and credit for the operation to Turkey (enabbaladi.net, August 3).

HTS and its leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani are designated as terrorists by the US and Turkey. HTS also denied IS's claim that it killed Abu al-Hussein. However, HTS's strategy in recent years has become centered around attempting to convince the world that it is a Syria-focused opposition group. Despite the animosity between IS and HTS, HTS would lose face among jihadists if they admitted to killing the leader of IS in coordination with Turkey and/or serving the United States' strategic interests.

Abu al-Hussein is the IS second caliph to be killed without any directly known American involvement. However, the United States' military presence in Syria and Iraq and the resources dedicated to fight IS still play a major role in keeping the group weak. Neither the killing of IS's fourth caliph nor IS's failure to regain control of any significant territory in Iraq or Syria have resulted in the group's total annihilation. Abu al-Hussein's short time leading the group showed its increasing vulnerability and deterioration. Disputes over the circumstances of his killing indicate that geopolitical complexities and the local levels of conflict in Syria and Iraq,

as well as beyond, will always play the major role in deciding IS's future.

Reframing the Four Caliphs

Abu al-Hussein had only led IS for six months when he was killed. Very little is known about his real identity and background. IS was shaken by the killing of its third caliph, Abu al-Hassan al-Qurashi, only a few months after his selection to the position in 2022—a time when the group needed to send a strong message. Abu al-Hussein was described at the time as a long-time IS veteran by the group's new spokesman, Abu Omar al-Muhajir (nabd.com, March 18, 2022).

However, a more realistic assessment suggested that Abu al-Hussein was actually in his thirties when he took over. This is a young age to assume such a position, especially when one accounts for the fact that he joined IS relatively late, in 2013. He was nevertheless selected by the most senior leadership body of the group, which now probably consists of less prominent figures than in the past (alaraby.co.uk, August 5).

IS has endured heavy losses among both its leadership and the rank-and-file as a result of the American-led campaign that began in 2014. A whole generation of jihadists who supported and surrounded IS's first caliph, Abubakr al-Baghdadi, are now gone. Many like al-Baghdadi's two major lieutenants, Abu Muslim al-Turkmani and Abu Ali al-Anbari, were killed in airstrikes by the US (in 2015 and 2016, respectively) (thenewkhalij.news, May 1, 2016). Others, meanwhile, were captured in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere.

Abu al-Hassan in Historical Context

Al-Baghdadi himself was killed in an American operation in northwestern Syria in 2019 (alaraby.co.uk, October 27, 2019). His successor, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi, was killed in a similar raid in the same region in 2022 (non14.net, February 3, 2022). Unlike al-Baghdadi, who oversaw

the zenith of IS's expansion and massive territorial gains— especially between 2011 and 2014—al-Hashimi's tenure represented a period of retreat. While there were at least some reports about the identity of al-Hashimi, his successor, Abu al-Hassan al-Quraishi, had come and gone in 2022 without any references about who he really was. Additionally, Abu al-Hassan did not record any video or audio messages, let alone make any public appearances.

While the first two caliphs of IS chose to seek refuge in northwestern Syria—an area that is controlled by Syrian opposition groups hostile to IS—Abu al-Hassan went to the south. He went to the southern province of Daraa, where IS once had a presence, which he sought to revive. This move also ended miserably for IS, as Abu al-Hassan was killed by Syrian opposition groups in the area in what it seemed to be accidental fighting, rather than a well-planned campaign (alaraby.co.uk, December 1, 2022).

The fourth caliph, Abu al-Hussein, returned to northwestern Syria, which indicated that the area was still a better location for IS leaders to attempt to hide than other parts of the country. It is the only part of Syria where the population is overwhelmingly Sunni and is still controlled by Sunni groups. There are also hundreds of thousands of displaced people from other parts of the country there; due to this, it is more feasible to establish a cover and hide one's real identity in the region.

The Turkish army maintains a presence in parts of northwestern Syria; although Turkey did not build a unified body for local armed Syrian opposition groups, it has recently seemed to have created a new strategy to deal with the Syrian conflict's complicated environment. In addition to prioritizing the threat of Kurdish rebels, Turkey is also looking towards future arrangements to settle the conflict. Such an agreement would require addressing and eliminating the threat IS poses to Turkey, Turkish-backed Syrian opposition

groups, and the global security ecosystem more broadly; this is done by, among other means, finding ways to kill IS's caliphs (orient-news.net, November 18, 2022).

Consequences of Killing Abu al-Hussein

On August 3, Abu Huthaifa al-Ansari, IS's new spokesman, released his first audio message to eulogize Abu al-Hussein and declared that the group had also chosen a successor, Abu Hafs al-Hashimi. No information about the real identity of either man was given in the 30 minute-long audio message. Al-Ansari portrayed the eras of each prior caliph from al-Baghdadi onwards as an epic of resistance and relentless struggle, but the lack of revelations about Abu al-Hussein and Abu al-Hassan's identities, even after their death, represented a major blow to IS's claimed caliphate (alquds.co.uk, August 3). Beyond this, the loss of territory and anything resembling a state has combined with the rapid succession of leaders to jeopardize IS's claim of Islamist preeminence in the eyes of even its "provinces," allied jihadist groups in other parts of the world; these militants also rely on the symbolism and legitimacy conferred by having a caliph in IS's former heartland of Syria and Iraq (arabwall.com, August 9).

In the following days after al-Ansari's announcement, IS media sources reported that the group's members around the world declared their allegiance (*bay'a*) to the new caliph. However, the main criticism of IS's leadership model by other Islamists has been always the idea of not announcing the real identity of its leader. In his message, al-Ansari reemphasized that under such circumstances, the secrecy was justified. In other words, the public need not know the identity of the caliph, as long as a certain group of the Muslim community leaders were familiar with him. In IS's conception, of course, those figures are IS's core leadership (marsad.ecss.com, August 8).

Since al-Julani's split from IS in 2013, he aligned his group, which operated at the

time under the name Jabhat al-Nusra, with al-Qaeda. Subsequently IS and al-Nusra went to war with each other in Syria, just as IS and al-Qaeda have been at war on the global stage. Starting from 2016, however, al-Julani distanced himself from al-Qaeda, changed his group's name several times, and, more critically, managed to occupy and control the northwestern province of Idlib while IS was losing its territory (as a result of the previously mentioned American-led campaign in Iraq and Syria). Speculation that IS might make concessions to HTS in return for shelter—as was suggested after the former lost all its territory—was proven wrong, as the two groups have remained at war with each other (epc.ae.ar, September 9, 2020).

Conclusion

IS has never hid its contempt and condemnation of HTS, but the killing of Abu al-Hussein was followed by a specific accusation of involvement. Despite the fact that IS's first two caliphs were killed in American raids in HTS areas, IS did not accuse HTS itself of participating or aiding the counter-terrorism efforts. However, with Abu al-Hussein's death, IS (albeit too weak currently) could well decide to start focusing on its conflict with HTS in revenge. Al-Ansari even accused HTS of arresting IS's former spokesman al-Muhajir, which apparently occurred sometime close to the killing of Abu al-Hussein. He further condemned HTS for arresting IS women, who according to him were ambushed with al-Muhajir; he suggested that the women may have been pressured to divulge sensitive information about IS. Even though HTS denied all of al-Ansari's accusations, the United States' official assessment was that HTS did kill Abu al-Hussein. The conflict between the two groups has always been brutal, but it is expected to intensify further after the killing of Abu al-Hussein.

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Qari Fasihuddin Fitrat: The Afghan Taliban's Tajik "Commander of the North"

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

Qari Fasihuddin Fitrat is the military commander of the armed forces of the Taliban-led Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA). An ethnic Tajik, Fitrat is currently leading the war on Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP). In June, Fitrat announced that the perpetrators of ISKP bombings in Badakhshan province—which killed Nisar Ahmad Ahmadi, the Taliban's deputy governor of Badakhshan—would not go unpunished ([Ariana News](#), June 8). Owing to Fitrat's personal charisma and unique position as the Taliban's first Tajik and non-Pashtun commander, he was able to rise to the most powerful military position in the current administration. He is now playing a leading role in countering the Taliban's internal and external security threats.

Early Life and Career

Born in Warduj District of Badakhshan Province, Fitrat belongs to a religious Tajik family ([Asia Plus](#), March 31). He was the son of Mawlawi Saifuddin, who served as an imam in Warduj in the 1980s. In religious circles, Fitrat's father was highly respected—not only in Warduj but also in the other conservative districts, including Yumgan, Jurm, and Baharak. Fitrat received his education during the Taliban's first administration (1996-2001), both in Afghanistan and Pakistan ([AAN](#), January 3, 2017).

By virtue of his loyalty to the Taliban, Fitrat rose through the Taliban ranks within a few years. Following the ouster of the Taliban's first government in Kabul in 2001 (as a result of the American invasion of Afghanistan), the Taliban created a de facto shadow government in various provinces of Afghanistan, appointing "officials" to exercise influence in the war-

torn country ([Profile Pelajar](#), July 27). In 2013, Fitrat became the “shadow governor” and head of the military commission in Badakhshan province, which borders both Tajikistan and China ([AAN](#), January 3, 2017).

In 2015, the former Afghan government claimed that Fitrat was killed during security operations in the Baharak District of Badakhshan Province. The Taliban, however, rejected the claim by the Ministry of Interior Affairs. The organization then issued an online statement to assert that Fitrat was still alive ([Khaama Press](#), October 3, 2015).

Fitrat’s Influence

Fitrat is a talented speaker and preacher. As the Taliban’s shadow governor, he preached about the virtues of jihad in a series of videos, calling the former Afghan government a “puppet for the infidels.” In a video clip released in 2015, Fitrat was seen addressing the surrendered Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers in Yumgan district. In the clip, Fitrat referred to the 2012 Quran burning at the United States’ base in Bagram and asked the surrendered soldiers whether it was fair “to shoot dead those who protest against the burning of the holy book.” He finally urged all ANA soldiers not to trust the US ([AAN](#), January 3, 2017).

On September 7, 2021, four years later, Fitrat was appointed as the head of Afghanistan’s armed forces ([Profile Pelajar](#), July 27). He became known for his success in military affairs, and is credited as being the strategic mind behind the Taliban’s conquest of Panjshir ([Samaa TV](#), September 7, 2021). After becoming military head, Fitrat addressed a gathering in Kabul and exclaimed that “Afghanistan would have a regular, disciplined, and strong army in [the] near future to defend and protect the country ... consultations in this field continue” ([XinhuaNet](#), September 16, 2021).

“Conqueror of the North”

Following the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban in August 2021, former Afghan Vice President Amrullah Saleh fled to Panjshir, where he joined the anti-Taliban resistance forces alongside Ahmed Massoud, who is the son of the late Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Massoud ([Samaa TV](#), September 7, 2021). As the last province resisting the Taliban advance towards the north, it took the Taliban four days of fighting under Fitrat to gain control of Panjshir. He then became the first Taliban leader in history to set foot in Bazarak, the provincial capital of Panjshir. Fitrat proceeded to play a key role in bringing the northern part of Afghanistan under Taliban control, becoming popularly known as the “Conqueror of the North.”

The Taliban failed to conquer Panjshir under its first regime (1996-2001) because the late Ahmad Shah Massoud did not surrender to the Taliban, resisting the Taliban until his death two days before September 11, 2001 ([Samaa TV](#), September 7, 2021). On September 6, 2021, however, the Taliban announced that its fighters had completely captured Panjshir ([XinhuaNet](#), September 16, 2021). Fitrat was the only non-Pashtun commander among the Taliban contingent that toppled the reconstituted Northern Alliance. Other Taliban commanders, such as those in the Haqqani network like Mullah Yaqub, Mullah Baradar, and Mullah Haibatullah, faced tough resistance in their home provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Kunar, and Ghazni, respectively ([Afghan Bios](#), April 17).

Campaign Against Dissident Hazara Commander

In June 2022, Fitrat led a military campaign against a dissident Hazara commander, Mehdi Mujahid, in Balkhab, a rural district in the Sar-e-Pul Province in northern Afghanistan ([Muslim Mirror](#), June 24, 2022). Mujahid was the most senior ethnic Hazara security official in the Taliban government. After the Taliban’s leadership

dismissed him for unspecified reasons, however, he revolted.

Mujahid accused the Taliban leadership of depriving the Shia Hazara minority of civil rights and posts in the new government. Taliban forces led by Fitrat, therefore, attacked Mujahid's stronghold in Balkhab. This led to Fitrat facing allegations of human rights abuses in his military campaign, with Amnesty International calling on the international community to recognize the rise in human rights violations in Afghanistan. The Taliban, however, rejected these allegations ([Radio Free Europe](#), July 1, 2022).

Ambitious Military Mastermind

As an army head, Fitrat is dedicated to raising a trained and professional Afghan military equipped with the equipment and weapons necessary to conduct modern warfare. In February, when addressing a graduation ceremony for 450 soldiers from Mansouri Army Corps in Khost, Fitrat showed his willingness to send his special forces even to other countries for training. Fitrat stated: "To the extent that we are able, our forces will receive training in Afghanistan. We will send them abroad for training if it is necessary and beyond our ability" ([Pakistan Observer](#), February 20). In the Taliban's current situation, however, Fitrat cannot send his fighters abroad for training in Pakistan, the Middle East, or elsewhere; as long as the Taliban government remains unrecognized by the international community, no country is willing to train its military. Fitrat has nevertheless announced plans to increase the number of troops from 150,000 to 200,000 in the future ([Tolo News](#), March 30).

Fitrat wants to build a professional national military out of the Taliban insurgency that fought against foreign forces and the previous American-backed Afghan government for 20 years. Afghanistan's budget has allocated a large share for defense, due largely to Fitrat's ambition to strengthen the Taliban's anti-aircraft

missile capacity. According to Fitrat, "From where we will obtain [anti-aircraft missile capacity] is confidential, but we should have it" ([Express Tribune](#), April 12). This indicates that Fitrat is concerned about securing Afghan airspace against drones and other incursions.

Conclusion

Fitrat is striving to make Afghanistan's defense impregnable, with the end-goal of strengthening the Taliban's hold over the country. At present, he is fully focused on air defense—a particularly weak point for the Taliban—while also being fully prepared to combat and crush ISKP, which has emerged as a threat to Afghanistan's internal security. His quick and powerful response to the Hazara commander's rebellion in northern Afghanistan reflects his strategy to uphold previous military successes in recently conquered areas.

Fitrat has also been highly respected among the Taliban from the very beginning for his family's religious background; likewise, he has earned plaudits from other jihadists for ideologically having been associated with the Taliban movement's fight against foreign occupation forces for years. The rise of a Tajik and non-Pashtun commander like Fitrat to the Taliban's most powerful military position reflects the strength of the ideological bond of the Pashtun-dominated Taliban movement. Indeed, as the son of an imam, it was Fitrat's adoption of the Taliban's radical version of Islam that brought him closer to the Taliban's leadership—not his ethnicity.

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