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Ras Abdula and Janhar Abdulhari: Key Abu Sayyaf Leaders Arrested in the Philippines

Jacob Zenn

In May, a Philippine army colonel announced that the fourth most wanted Abu Sayyaf member, Ras Abdullah (also known as Elhan Bahjin Abuhassan), was arrested in Zamboanga City ([Philippine News Agency](#), May 6). One month later, the Southern Police District (SPD) announced that the fifth most wanted Abu Sayyaf member, Janhar Abdulhari (also known as Janjan or Julpikar Pendiwata), was arrested in Quezon City ([Philippine News Agency](#), June 22). The arrests of these two and other, higher-level Abu Sayyaf commanders in the past several years have degraded the militant group's manpower and logistics network. To that point, Philippine military officials are now confident in predicting Abu Sayyaf's demise ([Benar News](#), July 31).

Ras Abdalla was a bomb-making expert and was affiliated with the Abu Sayyaf faction led by Marzan Ajijul and Jomar Mohammad ([The Philippine Star](#), May 9). In March 2021, Ajijul was captured in

Zamboanga City alongside several other members of his cell and various weapons and ammunition ([Mindanao Pagadian Frontline](#), March 29, 2021). Jomar Mohammed was nearly arrested when police captured his cousin, Omar Mabanza, in *Barangay* (district) Calabasa. Omar Mabanza was suspected to have ties to Abu Sayyaf, and had improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and other bomb-making components in his apartment at the time of his arrest. Jomar Mohammed, on the other hand, escaped and remains at large.

Jomar Mohammed's contingent of Abu Sayyaf is tied to the group's Basilan-based faction, and was involved in an attempt to conduct bombings in *Barangay* Calabasa. This operation had been meant as a way to divert security forces' attention from a planned prison breakout at the nearby San Ramon Prison and Penal Farm in *Barangay* Talisayan. However, the bombings were disrupted and high-risk prisoners tied to Jomar Mohammed were relocated to another prison in Manila; the new prison is both far away from Mindanao and also more secure ([Philippine News Agency](#), February 17). The many members of Abu Sayyaf's leadership that have been killed or arrested recently means that Jomar

Mohammed is one of the highest-level leaders remaining.

Any attempts at reviving Abu Sayyaf will be hindered by the fact that the group no longer has any remaining charismatic or well-known figures to unite around (Inquirer.net, May 24). Perhaps the last such leader was Radullah Sahiron, but in May it was determined that he had either died of natural causes or was otherwise debilitated due to age and ill health. Abu Toraife has been floated by the Philippine military as a possible new leader for the group. Toraife is known for having a part in several high-profile kidnapping operations dating back to the early 2000s as well as his role in bombings that occurred in Mindanao in 2018 (Philippine News Agency, September 9, 2019). Beyond these, however, Toraife has yet to make any significant impact on the movement, let alone give public statements claiming leadership.

Even though Ras Abdullah and Janhar Abdulhari were not as high-profile as Sahiron, the Philippine military's continued pursuit of them and other Abu Sayyaf leaders has severely diminished the group's capabilities. Moreover, with few potential successors, the group appears to lack the sort of core cadre necessary to stage a revival. This, in turn, is why Philippine authorities declared parts of Mindanao "Abu Sayyaf-free" in September, assuring the population that "peace" is beginning to return to the beleaguered territory (Manila Times, September 8). Given the military's successful operations against Abu Sayyaf's leaders, this certainly appears to be the case.

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Abdul Kabir: A Profile of the Taliban's Former Acting Prime Minister *Pro Tempore*

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

From May to July, Maulvi Abdul Kabir served as acting prime minister *pro tempore* of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan for Mullah Muhammad Hassan Akhund, who had been suffering from health problems (Etemaad, May 18; EFE, July 17). Abdul Kabir has served in key positions in the previous and current Taliban regimes and has been under UN sanction since 2001.

Following his selection as acting prime minister *pro tempore* in May, Abdul Kabir declared that his government seeks positive relations based on mutual respect with the international community (Radio Pakistan, May 27). Abdul Kabir previously proved his diplomatic acumen as a key negotiator in the Doha Accord, which resulted in the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

While Akhund is still officially acting prime minister, he has missed key events since he resumed his post. **[1]** This includes the second anniversary of the Taliban's seizure of power and the celebrations around Afghan Independence Day, which occurred on August 15 and 19, respectively (TOLONews, September 9). Akhund, however, felt well enough to receive the credentials of Chinese Ambassador Zhao Xing on September 13. **[2]**

Considering that the aging Akhund could withdraw from politics once again, the fact that Abdul Kabir was chosen to lead Afghanistan before might hint that he could be asked by Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada to do so once more. Moreover, one can assume that he still carries outsized influence among Afghan government leaders. Abdul Kabir's appointment as acting prime minister came at a time when the Taliban faced particularly intense international pressure over its radical policies and restrictions on

women. However, Abdul Kabir's relative moderation may be a sign of development toward the Taliban's twin goals of ending the sanctions and isolation of Afghanistan.

Early Life and Career

Born in 1963 in Nika Neka District of Afghanistan's Paktika Province, Abdul Kabir belongs to the Zadran Pashtun tribe. He can speak Pashto, Urdu, and English ([Afghan Bios](#), September 17). Abdul Kabir was considered very close to the Taliban's founder, Mullah Omar, who appointed him to the Rahbari Shura, the Taliban's high leadership council. In 1996, he was then appointed governor of Nangarhar Province under the previous Taliban regime. Nangarhar, which lies on the eastern border adjoining Pakistan, later became a Taliban stronghold during their 20-year struggle against US forces in Afghanistan ([Al Jazeera](#), May 18).

For six months in 2001, Abdul Kabir also served as acting prime minister in the first Taliban regime ([Express Tribune](#), May 17). In January 2001, the United Nations Security Council listed him as a sanctioned person. Abdul Kabir concurrently held several other roles at the time, including second deputy of economic affairs, member of the Council of Ministers, and governor of Nangarhar Province, as previously mentioned ([Afghan Bios](#), September 17).

In October 2007, Abdul Kabir was appointed by Mullah Omar as the commander of Taliban loyalists in Afghanistan's eastern provinces, including Nangarhar, Laghman, Kunar, and Nooristan ([XinhuaNet](#), October 21, 2007). In 2010, Pakistani intelligence authorities arrested Abdul Kabir during a raid against the Taliban in Pakistan's northwestern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa ([Dawn](#), February 25, 2010). Abdul Kabir was released in 2021, joining the Taliban's new government. Abdul Kabir initially served as the assistant to the economic deputy and then as Acting Prime Minister Akhund's

political deputy ([The News](#) [Pakistan], May 17).

Speculations Around the Appointment

Akhund was understood to be suffering from some sort of disease, and underwent several months of treatment in Kandahar ([TOLONews](#), September 9). Reports suggest that Akhund suffered a heart attack after visiting Kandahar during the Eid holidays, and had a particularly slow recovery ([Express Tribune](#) [Pakistan], May 17). It was suspected at the time that this might have indicated that Abdul Kabir would continue as Acting Prime Minister in a more permanent capacity ([EFE](#), July 17).

Abdul Kabir was allegedly appointed acting prime minister *pro tempore* on the request of Sirajuddin Haqqani—leader of the Haqqani network since 2018, as well as deputy supreme leader and acting minister of the interior. Ongoing intrigue might have caused the supreme leader to appoint Abdul Kabir in order to balance against the Kandahari Taliban, which held more seats in the cabinet overall ([Express Tribune](#) [Pakistan], May 17). Abdul Kabir may be, therefore, considered to be close to Pakistan, given the Haqqani network's role as Pakistan's Afghan proxy ([Al Jazeera](#), May 18). Abdul Kabir's appointment by special decree, moreover, triggered speculation about an internal rift or power struggle among different factions within the Taliban government. Taliban officials denied any such rift ([Al Jazeera](#), May 18).

Looking back, Abdul Kabir's period of temporary rule avoided outwardly obvious disunity. Abdul Kabir is a relatively moderate leader when compared with the ailing Akhund. For example, under his leadership, Taliban authorities in Herat allowed several middle and high schools for girls to reopen ([Al Jazeera](#), May 30). While this did not lead to a broader moderation of the regime's social policy, it could still be considered an effort by the Taliban to reduce Afghanistan's international isolation.

Conclusion

Among the Taliban leadership, there is a lack of relatively moderate and accommodating leaders like Abdul Kabir, who can successfully interact with other nations in a diplomatic setting. Today, the Taliban government has not yet been officially recognized by any country in the world, and it faces continued sanctions over its ban on girls' education and other discriminatory policies against women and religious minorities in particular. After two years of international isolation, it may be the case that some of the group's leaders recognize that a change away from their most radical policies is required. Abdul Kabir's tenure as acting prime minister *pro tempore* reflects a possible willingness on the part of the Taliban to open up to the outside world.

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Notes:

[1] Muhammad Hassan Akhund is officially the acting prime minister—not prime minister—leading a caretaker government since August 2021. Abdul Kabir is one among several acting deputy prime ministers, assuming the role of acting prime minister *pro tempore* when performing as the acting prime minister.

[2] While China has not yet recognized the Taliban regime, it was the first (and at the time of writing, only) country to have sent an ambassador to Afghanistan since August 2021. Chinese companies and Beijing have been willing to invest in Afghanistan where other countries have not ([Afghanistan Analysts Network](#), September 27).

Saddam Haftar: The Marshal's Heir Apparent in Libya

Herbert Maack

At the end of August, forces from the so-called "Libyan National Army" conducted a combined air-raid and airborne assault on Umm al-Araneb, Murzug District in Libya's southern region of Fezzan. The operation targeted rebels from the Chadian Front for Change and Concord (*Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad*, FACT), who were using Libyan territory to launch attacks against neighboring Chad. The forces involved were spearheaded by the Tariq Ben Zeyd (TBZ) brigade, led personally by Saddam Haftar—Marshal Khalifa Haftar's son. Saddam is considered to be the elder Haftar's likely successor ([Al Jazeera](#), August 25).

Saddam's Prospects Amid Libya's Political Divisions

Libya has been engulfed in armed conflict since 2011. The actors involved have coalesced into parallel governments, each supported by unaccountable militias and armed groups. Based out of Benghazi, military strongman Khalifa Haftar leads a struggle against Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah's internationally recognized, Tripoli-based administration. While the mercurial Haftar has built up his powerbase in eastern Libya, age and persistent rumors of ill health (following an alleged stroke in 2018) are forcing the 80-year-old Haftar to consider succession ([France24](#), April 27, 2018).

In recent years, Khalifa Haftar has started to delegate his powers to his sons, cousins, and close advisers. Saddam is currently speculated to be the "heir apparent." Born into the al-Furjani tribe in Benghazi in 1991, Saddam is the youngest of six brothers. It is not known how Saddam overtook his older brothers to become the Marshal's preferred successor. However, two of his brothers, Okba and al-Muntasir, live in the United States. This makes them

unlikely contestants for their father's position; a third brother, Belqasim, serves as a top political advisor to the elder Haftar.

It is thought that Saddam's brazen behavior may have partially improved his standing. This was exemplified by his starting of a bank shootout in Tripoli in 2011, an incident in which Saddam was injured. Saddam also appears to have worked to finance his father's regime ([Libya Tribune](#), October 12, 2020). As a result, Saddam and another brother, Khaled, stand out as their father's most prominent partners. Moreover, both are army officers and command forces within the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), which is also often referred to as their father's self-styled "Libyan National Army" (LNA) ([Al-Estiklal](#), March 2).

Saddam's Stature

The 32-year-old Saddam now holds the rank of Brigadier and has been rapidly promoted through the ranks of the LAAF. In 2016, Saddam was made Captain, being promoted five years later to Colonel, despite the fact that he is otherwise a civilian lacking any prior experience in military institutions or academies. Moreover, Saddam did not even finish high school with a diploma ([The Libya Observer](#), December 26, 2016; [Libya Update](#), [December 1, 2021](#), [May 4](#)).

Saddam compensated for his lack of formal education by establishing the "106th Battalion" in 2016 as an internal security force and sort-of praetorian guard for his father. Commanding the 106th Battalion, Saddam recaptured Benghazi after hard fighting from Islamic State (IS)-affiliated jihadists in December 2017. The Battalion gained notoriety the same month, however, when it removed cash worth hundreds of millions of dollars from the Central Bank building in Benghazi. Much of the cash vanished—possibly financing the expansion of the 106th Battalion to a brigade size in 2018.

The force has since been assessed to be the most professional of all LAAF brigades and has benefitted from obtaining a large amount of advanced foreign weaponry. Many of these arms were acquired as a result of Russian and Emirati-backing during the Second Libyan Civil War. [1] In 2016, Saddam Haftar took over the command of yet another unit, the TBZ, which is named after the eighth-century Muslim commander who conquered the Iberian Peninsula. The TBZ consists of former veterans of Muammar Gaddafi's forces and fighters from tribes allied to Khalifa Haftar. The TBZ is also believed to be one of the most capable armed groups within LAAF. The 106th Brigade has been accused of war crimes by Amnesty International ([Amnesty International](#), December 19, 2022). In addition, the UN has condemned the TBZ for evicting people and demolishing their homes in Benghazi ([Middle East Eye](#), September 5).

All in the Family

While Saddam's brother Khaled has also made a career in the LAAF, Saddam himself has carried out additional activities in the family's diplomatic and business ventures ([The New Arab](#), July 13). Khaled is known for his time as commander of the Khalid Ibn al-Wahid Brigade (KWB), and later for his appointment as head of the newly created "Security Units," which serve as an amalgamation of the 106th Brigade and the KWB. Saddam was reportedly his father's choice as envoy to meet with Jordanian military representatives in 2016. Saddam also allegedly met with the head of Turkish intelligence and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan sometime before 2019. Saddam is also believed to have made additional trips to the UAE and Tel Aviv in March 2021 to offer diplomatic normalization to Israel in return for military aid ([Haaretz](#), November 8, 2021).

The Haftars can be considered a "military-commercial" family through their vast portfolio of international properties in the United States, UAE, and Jordan. In the United States, Okba Haftar has been

representing the family's interests. This has become particularly relevant, as the family has faced lawsuits under the Torture Victim Protection Act of 1991, which allows family members of the victims of extrajudicial killings and torture perpetrated by individuals acting in an official government capacity to sue those responsible ([Middle East Eye](#), August 10, 2022). Saddam, meanwhile, has been associated with murkier businesses, including a gold-for-cash venture involving Venezuela as well as the selling of scrap metal and oil to Turkey ([Minbar Libya](#), October 12, 2020). Saddam, has, however, also been accused of outright criminality, due to his alleged involvement in human trafficking and drug smuggling rings across the Mediterranean region. Funds from these sources are supposedly used to finance and preserve the Haftar family politico-military entity in eastern Libya; Saddam is said to oversee and control the flow of migrants and drugs from Libya to Europe ([Lighthouse Report](#), July 20).

Like his father, Saddam Haftar does not enjoy broad popularity across Libya. This may be due in part to his ostentatious 2020 wedding, where his father supposedly plied guests with \$10 million in money and gifts. At the lavish event, poets sang praises to Saddam—40 Toyota Hilux vehicles (infamous as one of the main vehicles used as a “technical”) were reportedly given to 40 poets in eastern Libya for glorifying the Haftar family, for example ([Libyan Express](#), November 24, 2020).

The Secret to Saddam's Success

Regardless, Libyan politics are not a popularity contest. Thus, for Saddam's success, the backing of his father's allies and his tribe has been crucial. His father reportedly supports Saddam through his partners in eastern Libya, namely the Speaker of the Parliament of Tobruk, Aguila Saleh, and the head of Libya's Presidential Council, Mohammed Menfi ([The New Arab](#), January 30). Also crucial for Saddam will be the unity of the Haftar family; there are reports that conflicts have begun to unfold

between Saddam and his brother, Belqasim, with the latter opposing many of his brother's decisions. Saddam has been able to cement his position in the family in part by winning these struggles ([Fikra Forum](#), October 21, 2020).

Khalifa Haftar's opponents at home and abroad as well as foreign backers will need to analyze the benefits and risks involved with Saddam taking over from his father. The elder Haftar's history of working with opposing backers complicates things further. While Russia is generally understood to be a close supporter of Haftar, they find his American citizenship and 21 years in the United States suspect ([Fikra Forum](#), October 21, 2020). In return, the United States has concerns about human rights violations by Haftar's faction as well as the Marshal's links to Russia's Wagner Group ([Al-Estiklal](#), March 2).

It remains to be seen how regional actors, such as the UAE and Egypt, view Saddam. Given the ongoing civil war in neighboring Sudan, Egypt would likely prefer a smooth transition in eastern Libya for security reasons. On the other hand, those who oppose Haftar may celebrate his stepping down as a sign that the LAAF is weakening.

Conclusion

It is not known how a dynastic transfer of power will be accepted locally and regionally. Khalifa Haftar has done his utmost to restructure LAAF forces and groom Saddam. This should be understood as an attempt to cement the Haftar family legacy. Absent major change, the Marshal's youngest son appears to have the pole position in the race to succeed Haftar.

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Notes:

[1] See Wolfram Lacher, November 2020, SWP Working paper “A Most Irregular Army” https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspa-piere/2020WP02_FG06_lac.pdf and Tim

Eaton, June 2, 2021, Chatham House Research Paper "The Libyan Arab Armed Forces," <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/libyan-arab-armed-forces/02-inside-laafs-armed-networks>.

Shafiq Mengal: Pakistan's Most Lethal Mercenary Leader in Balochistan

Osama Ahmad

On July 21, clashes between Shafiq Mengal's "death squad" and fighters loyal to Baloch nationalist leader Sardar Akhtar Mengal left four people dead in Wadh, Khuzdar District in Balochistan. Sardar Akhtar Mengal claimed that state-sponsored militias in Balochistan, namely Shafiq Mengal's death squad, were formed to eliminate Baloch nationalists and other pro-democracy parties ([Dawn](#), July 21). More broadly, the conflict in Wadh has been ongoing since the 2002 general elections, when the supporters of Sardar Akhtar Mengal and Shafiq Mengal's forces clashed over a land dispute in Wadh. Although the two sides eventually calmed down and the clashes did not turn into a full-blown war, in the last two decades the dispute has emerged as a source of perpetual violence in Wadh ([WE News](#), July 20). This unending wave of violence has led to mass migration and displacement from Wadh ([The Balochistan Post](#), October 13). As Wadh has significant geographic importance, the conflict has security implications for the wider region and is an example of how state-sponsored militias like those behind Shafiq Mengal have turned the province into a battlefield.

Shafiq Mengal's Background

Shafiq Mengal belongs to the Mohamadzai sub-tribe of the Mengal clan, whose members live in Wadh. His father, Naseer Mengal, was the ex-Chief Minister of Balochistan and then became the head of the federal Ministry of Petroleum and

Natural Resources. In his early years, Shafiq and his family lived as a middle-class household in Wadpa Colony in Khuzdar District. Shafiq Mengal, his elder brother Atta-Ur-Rehman, and their uncle Qudoos Mengal used to smuggle drugs in non-registered vehicles to acquire additional money ([The Balochistan Post](#), September 19, 2017). This led to Shafiq's early connections with powerful Baloch smugglers and anti-state militants in the region. Nevertheless, after dropping out of Aitchison College, Shafiq enrolled in an elite boarding school in Lahore and then joined a Deobandi Seminary in Karachi.

During his time in Karachi, Shafiq became associated with the Baloch smugglers and extortion mafia active there. Hyderabad, Sindh Province was the hub of Shafiq's activities. When General Pervez Musharraf seized power in October 1999, state security agencies selected Shafiq and his brother Atta-ur-Rehman as state "agents of death" in Balochistan ([Eurasia Review](#), May 4, 2021). This meant he and his brothers were hired as mercenaries by the state to fight against Baloch separatists. At the same time, while in the Deobandi seminary in Karachi, Shafiq met senior members of Lashkar-e-Taiba. These contacts convinced him to take part in the "holy Islamic war, Jihad" in Indian-held Kashmir. From there his career as a militant began ([The Balochistan Post](#), September 19, 2017).

Militants and smugglers have close ties in Pakistan, especially in Karachi and Balochistan. They co-exist and often assist each other when in trouble, and it is often the case that individuals involved in either militancy or smuggling participate in the other. Shafiq, involved in smuggling activities and inspired by jihadists, eventually followed the path from smuggler to pro-state militant.

Forming and Running a Death Squad

Shafiq formed the first "death squad" in Balochistan in 2008. This group was called the Musallah Defah Tanzeem (MDT), and

had the mission of “defending” Balochistan from pro-independence groups. Shafiq had the support of the Pakistani security establishment, as well as connections acquired through his powerful political family; together, these helped him raise his militia. Shafiq subsequently initiated the killings of not only suspected nationalists and Hazara Shias, but also of political, non-political, and tribal rivals. Mass graves attributed to Shafiq’s MDT were discovered in 2014 in Tootak, a rural area 55 kilometers to the north of Khuzdar. 169 dead bodies were recovered ([Eurasia Review](#), May 4, 2021). Shafiq, it is assumed, did this to scare those who opposed him, thereby cementing his dominance in the region.

Shafiq was also accused of killing state security forces. An officer from the Balochistan government’s Department of Home and Tribal Affairs claimed that a First Information Report (FIR; the first step in any investigation) was lodged against Shafiq in relation to the murder of eight security personnel ([Dawn](#), May 27, 2014). By doing this, Shafiq appeared to want to demonstrate that he was not bound by the state, and was capable of attacking it if pressed. Beyond this, Shafiq’s anti-government killings indicated that his loyalties could change, depending on the circumstances.

In official conversations about the graves in Tootak, Shafiq was first mentioned by one of the seven eyewitnesses who testified before Justice Meskanzai in Khuzdar on February 13, 2014. The witness claimed he had evidence that his brother, whose body was among those recovered from the Tootak graves, was abducted by Shafiq. By that point in time, Shafiq had also expanded his base to Tootak ([Siasat.pk](#), March 19, 2014).

Apart from Shafiq’s powerful “death squad,” several other, less powerful local militia groups in Balochistan established “death squads.” **[1]** However, Shafiq’s group remained in good favor with the security establishment for some years, as

his forces fought alongside them against Baloch insurgents. In this, Shafiq and his group are acting as mercenaries for the state. Baloch insurgent groups have networks of sympathizers and facilitators in the Jacobabad and Shikarpur districts of Sindh. Although the attacks in these districts were claimed by Lashkar-e-Jhangvi or its affiliate, the Ramzan Mengal group, it is believed that Shafiq enjoys strong ties with these and other jihadist groups in the region ([Daily Times](#), November 2, 2019). Shafiq’s MDT was eventually put on a terror watchlist by Pakistan in 2010 ([Voice of America](#), July 24, 2018).

Conclusion

Despite his association with anti-state militant outfits such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Baloch smugglers, Shafiq also ran for election. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) found him fit to stand for election in 2018 for the National Assembly seat from Khuzdar. Supposedly, this was meant as a reminder to Sardar Akhtar Mengal—the eventual winner of the seat—of the limits of his power ([Dawn](#), August 20). If notorious elements like Shafiq are treated with such tenderness and are given free rein by the state, they may just as easily get out of hand and turn against it.

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Notes:

[1] These included the Zakaria M. Hasniled “death squad” in Khuzdar; Deen Muhammad Deenu’s group in Awaran; squads led by Samir Sabzal, Rashid Pathan and Sardar Aziz in Kech; and units led by Maqbool Shambezi in Panjgur and Siraj Raisani in Mastung ([Eurasia Review](#), May 4, 2021).