



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

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Abdel-Malick: ISGS's Number Two Eliminated in Burkina Faso

Jacob Zenn

Executive Summary

- Burkina Faso's Air Force killed Islamic State in the Greater Sahara's second highest-ranking member, Harouna Oulel (alias Abdel-Malick), in an air strike on a convoy the militant was leading in January 2024. This represents a rare victory for Burkina Faso's counter-terrorism efforts, and a sign that the Burkinabe Air Force's recent modernization campaign allows it to strike jihadists more effectively.
- Despite the fact that Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) is falling behind its al-Qaeda-affiliated rival Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and it has lost many of its key leaders since 2022, the group continues to be a significant threat in the Sahel.

Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) continues to be a significant threat in the Sahel. Even while ISGS is falling behind its al-Qaeda-affiliated rival Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), it represents a threat that should not be discounted despite the loss of the group's main leaders. ISGS founder Abu Adnan Walid al-Sahrawi was killed in 2022. Not long afterward, his deputy, Abdelhakim al-Sahrawi, was also killed ([The Africa Report](#), September 22, 2021). On January 24, the group's second highest-ranking member, Harouna Oulel (alias Abdel-Malick), was also killed.

Abdel-Malick reflected the "new generation" of ISGS leaders because, according to the Burkinabe government's "Most Wanted" list, he was a Fulani—a trans-Saharan semi-sedentary population which faces discrimination and stigmatization by the region's governments ([Burkina24](#), January 23). In contrast, the previous two leaders (both with the surname al-Sahrawi) were from Western Sahara and had previously operated in Algeria before migrating down to the Sahel. In the previous cases, it was only after this that they integrated with Fulanis and other Sahelian ethnic groups to form the

brigades that eventually merged into ISGS in 2015.

Over time, however, Fulanis like Abdel-Malick have moved into the leadership ranks of ISGS. Abdel-Malick eventually became sufficiently prominent to induce the Burkinabe government to offer a 150,000,000 CFA (around \$250,000) reward for his capture ([Burkina24](#), January 23). Abdel-Malick was from a small village in northern Burkina Faso, where ISGS's influence in the country is at its greatest. Given this, it is also unsurprising that he was targeted for recruitment by Abdelhakim al-Sahrawi and then designated as the commander for Gountouré-Gnégné Commune in Déou Department ([Modern Ghana](#), January 25). In that location, he specialized in kidnappings and weapons training ([X/@SimNasr](#), December 22, 2022). Abu Adnan Walid al-Sahrawi also married a Fulani woman from northern Burkina Faso, which helped ISGS consolidate a foothold in that area. The marriage also evidenced his and ISGS's interest in recruiting Fulanis to their cause ([The Africa Report](#), February 12, 2020).

Abdel-Malick commanded senior ISGS fighters despite his relative youth. He met his demise leading a convoy of fighters in northern Burkina Faso. While Abdel-Malick's fighters stopped to rest, the Burkinabe air force bombarded the militant convoy—Abdel-Malick was among the casualties ([X/@ZagazOlamakama](#), January 24). Abdel-Malick appears to have underestimated the Burkinabe Air Force's upgrades since 2023, including their procurement of more advanced drone technology. These improvements allow the Burkinabe military to strike jihadists in ways not previously possible ([Times Aerospace](#), August 17, 2023).

Burkinabe forces appear to have targeted this particular convoy for several reasons. In addition to Abdel-Malick's presence, one truck was carrying weapons and equipment from the ISGS stronghold of Ouadalan. This convoy was likely part of an effort to

expand the war between ISGS and Burkina Faso to a new front.

ISGS, like JNIM, has been rapidly moving from the Burkina Faso–Niger–Mali “tri-border region” towards the interior of Burkina Faso and coastal West Africa. As a result, the Burkinabe government considers Abdel-Malick's death the first step towards retaking the country's territory ([RFI](#), January 24). While this may be overly optimistic, eliminating Abdel-Malick represents a rare success for Burkina Faso's counter-terrorism efforts.

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Salaheddin Faroughi: A Profile of the Baloch Emir of Jaish-al-Adl

Sanchita Bhattacharya

Executive Summary

- Salaheddin Faroughi (alias Abdolrahim Mollahzadeh) is the emir of Jaish-al-Adl (JAA), a militant group seeking autonomy or an independent state for the Baloch people of Iran and Pakistan. JAA was the proximate cause of the most recent series of cross-border fights between the two states.
- JAA splintered off from the earlier Sunni militant group Jundullah, which operated for over 40 years against the Iranian government in the Baloch- and Sunni-majority Sistan and Baluchestan province.

Salaheddin Faroughi (alias Abdolrahim Mollahzadeh) is the emir of Jaish-al-Adl (JAA), or the Army of Justice and Equality

([Iran Wire](#), November 4, 2013). The group recently catapulted into the spotlight after Iran launched missiles into Pakistani territory on January 16. Tehran's stated goal was targeting JAA bases at the village of Koh-e-Sabz in the Panjgaur District of Balochistan Province. The situation intensified when Pakistan struck back by launching air strikes two days later under the umbrella of "Operation *Marg Bar Sarmachar*" (death to insurgents) (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), January 31).

These clashes highlight the importance of Faroughi. He is increasingly considered a threat to the internal security of both Iran and Pakistan, as he aims to establish a sovereign country for the Baloch people of Iran and Pakistan. Further, his anti-Shia stance makes him a particularly concerning figure for Iran.

Background

Faroughi was born in 1979 in Rāsk in the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchestan. Due to this, he has close ties to Baloch tribes in the neighboring Balochistan region in Pakistan. Faroughi has consistently asserted that JAA is only fighting to support the Sunnis and ethnic Balochs of the Iran-Pakistan border region, denying having any links to Islamic State (IS) or al-Qaeda ([Midstone Centre](#), November 8, 2022). While this has not yet been confirmed, some media outlets have speculated that Faroughi is related to Molavi Abdolhamid Esmailzahi. Esmailzahi is a moderate Sunni cleric and Imam of Friday Prayer in Zahedan, Iran. If this is true, it would mean that Faroughi's path differed significantly from Esmailzahi's ([Iran Wire](#), November 4, 2013). Faroughi's brother, Amir Naroui, was killed by the Taliban in Afghanistan for his leadership role in Ansar al-Furqan. They are an ethnic Baloch militant group operating primarily against the Iranian government ([Al Mayadeen](#), January 20, 2024).

Forming JAA

In an interview with the Saudi newspaper *Riyadh* in 2015, Faroughi described his group as a defensive military organization established to safeguard the national and religious rights of the Baloch people and the Sunnis in Iran ([Rawabet Center](#), May 14, 2017). Before 2015, JAA had splintered off of Jundallah, another Sunni militant organization based in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan Province. For more than 40 years, the Iranian government has been embroiled in conflict in the province. The majority of the province's population is ethnically Baloch and religiously Sunni, whereas the rest of Iran is composed of Persian, Azeri, or various minority ethnicities that are largely Shia ([Iran Wire](#), November 4, 2013).

Jundallah's former leader, Abdolmalek Rigi, founded the group around 2003 and served as its leader until the Iranian Government captured and executed him in 2010. After the execution of Rigi, the group splintered into several factions, of which JAA became the most active and influential. As a result, Iran considers JAA to be Jundallah's successor and the leader of the Baloch resistance in Iran. Officially, the group's stated goals are more limited, however. JAA claims to advocate primarily for Balochi cultural, economic, and political autonomy from Tehran, with an added goal of spreading awareness of their people's plight ([National Counterterrorism Center](#), October 2022).

Faroughi was a prominent member of Jundallah. Another one of his other brothers, Abdolmalek Mollazadeh, was executed in January 2012 by the Iranian government after he was arrested and charged with the assassination of a local Sunni leader, Molavi Mostafa Jangizehi. Jangizehi had worked with the government paramilitary group, the Basij. After 12 other people were arrested in April 2012 in connection with the assassination, Mollazadeh fled Iran and moved to Pakistan, where he set up JAA ([Antiwar.com](#), November 9, 2013).

Following the appointment of Faroughi as emir of JAA, he declared the establishment of JAA by unifying armed Balochi factions and movements waging war against the Iranian government ([Rawabet Center](#), May 14, 2017). JAA has accordingly claimed responsibility for abductions, numerous lethal bombings, ambushes, and other attacks against Iranian security forces in the restive region ([Hasht-e Subh](#), June 15, 2021). On the foreign policy side, Faroughi was also known for opposing Iran's support for President Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian Civil War ([France24](#), February 14, 2019).

Conclusion

The complicated elements of ethnicity, religious sectarianism, violence, and geopolitical tensions in both Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan Province and Pakistan's Balochistan region have provided ample reason for dissent among the Baloch population. Against this backdrop, Faroughi gained a following because of his desire to carve out an independent state for Sunni Balochi people from both Iran and Pakistan. Although Pakistan is playing it safe with JAA, in the long run, the ethnic imbroglio on both sides of the border could prove as detrimental to the security establishment in Pakistan as it has in Iran.

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Marwan Barghouti: Will Palestinian Prisoner Pursue an Agreement with Israel?

Andrew McGregor

Executive Summary

- Marwan Barghouti is a Palestinian leader serving multiple life sentences in Israeli prison for his role in the second intifada. Hamas has included his name at the top of their list of prisoners to be exchanged for hostages taken in the October 7, 2023 attack.
- Barghouti has been a prominent figure in Palestinian politics since the first intifada in the late 1980s, and his philosophy combines peace negotiations with armed resistance against Israeli occupation.
- While some compare him to Nelson Mandela, others criticize Barghouti for advocating violence. He is widely popular among Palestinians. His release is complicated by concerns from Fatah and Hamas about his potential political influence over the Palestinian movement.

In the midst of the war in Gaza, Israel's political factions are once again consumed by the debate over the release of a Palestinian leader who may negotiate a lasting peace with Israel or ignite a third Palestinian *intifada* (uprising). Successive Israeli governments have discussed Marwan Barghouti's release, but none have had the willingness to do so because some believe he continues to represent a threat to Israel. Now, however, Hamas has included his name at the top of their list of

prisoners to be exchanged for hostages ([Times of Israel](#), February 2).

According to Barghouti, violent resistance must exist side-by-side with peace negotiations: "We've tried a struggle without negotiations, and negotiations without a struggle, and it didn't help. Only negotiations and a struggle will assure the liberation" ([Haaretz](#) [Tel Aviv], July 5, 2016).

After more than two decades in Israel's toughest prisons serving five life-terms on murder and terrorism charges, Israeli and even Palestinian authorities both continue to fear the influence of Barghouti. He was the leader of the second *intifada* before his arrest in 2002. As international and domestic pressure grows for his release, Barghouti is being shifted from one solitary confinement cell to another to prevent communication with the outside world. The latest transfer in mid-February came when Israel reported information regarding Barghouti's role in "a planned uprising" ([Palestine Chronicle](#), February 18).

Internally, Barghouti is viewed as a challenger to octogenarian Palestinian Authority (PA) leader Mahmud Abbas. Abbas is a relic of Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and is regularly accused of being both corrupt and compromised by Israeli security forces. Abbas is in ill health and is now in the 18th year of the four-year term he won in the 2005 Palestinian elections—the last to be held. Barghouti's popularity in Palestine could make him successor to Abbas as PA leader.

Barghouti's Background

Marwan Hasib Ibrahim Barghouti (alias Abu al-Qassam) was born in 1959 to a family of modest means in a Palestinian village north of Ramallah in the West Bank. A Fatah member by age 15, Barghouti was arrested four years later and served a two-year sentence for terrorism-related activities. Barghouti began pursuing education by earning a high school diploma behind bars.

By 2010, he had earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Cairo Institute of Arab Research and Studies. His doctoral thesis, like his most recent book, was smuggled out of jail one page at a time over a period of years. He is an emotional speaker and is fluent in Hebrew and English, which he learned in prison. Further, as a father of three boys and one daughter, he is known to be an advocate of women's rights ([The National](#) [Abu Dhabi], April 19, 2017).

The First Intifada: 1987–1993

Barghouti was a prominent organizer in the first Palestinian *intifada*. Deported to Jordan by Israeli authorities in 1987, he remained there for over six years until the signing of the first Oslo Accord allowed his return to the West Bank in 1993. Barghouti was at first enthusiastic about the promise of the Oslo Accords and associated with many people on the Israeli left who were of a like mind.

However, Barghouti became critical of the conduct of PLO officials returning from Tunis, which was the PLO headquarters from 1982 to 1994, after the signing of the second Oslo Accord in 1995. This made him an enemy of the PLO for his opposition to corruption. Meanwhile, the continuing expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the rule of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon eventually led him to reject the Oslo Accords altogether.

The Second Intifada: 2000–2005

The second *intifada* began in September 2000 when many Palestinians became convinced the "peace process" was only a means of expanding Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. Violence erupted following a provocative visit by Ariel Sharon and an Israeli military detachment to Jerusalem's al-Aqsa Mosque. Barghouti described this as "the straw that broke the camel's back" ([The National](#) [Abu Dhabi], April 19, 2017). Opponents of Barghouti's release often cite his declaration in the *intifada's* opening days: "We must take

revenge. We must kill Israelis. Yes. We have bullets. We have rifles, and they will be aimed at the occupation" ([Haaretz](#) [Tel Aviv], July 5, 2016). At the same time, then-chief of the IDF's Central Command, Moshe Ya'alon, described Barghouti as a useful tool for Arafat, who was "rearing him as a tiger he could unleash when necessary." [1]

Barghouti directed armed "resistance" operations in the West Bank by two Fatah-related militant groups, the Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade and Tanzim. The latter had many young members who felt similarly alienated from the "Tunis" Fatah leaders as Barghouti. Israeli authorities even tried to assassinate Barghouti in 2001 but succeeded only in killing his bodyguard ([Haaretz](#) [Tel Aviv], April 18, 2002).

Conviction and Imprisonment

Barghouti was arrested in Ramallah on April 15, 2002, and sent to Tel Aviv for trial. Before his arrest, he declared that Israel could have "either peace and security or occupation and settlement, but never both." [2] During his interrogation regarding what Israeli authorities described as "terrorism" but what Barghouti "stubbornly described as military activity," Barghouti told the interrogators: "In principle I am against murdering civilians on both sides ... Theory is one thing, practice is another." [3] Without staging a defense or acknowledging the legitimacy of the Israeli court, Barghouti instead delivered detailed expositions of why his detention and the activities of the IDF in the West Bank were violations of international law. This included his "abduction" from PA territory after his arrest. [4]

Convicted of planning and assisting three attacks that killed five Israelis from 2001–2002 on June 6, 2004, Barghouti received five life sentences plus 40 years. All were consecutive, ensuring he would never be released. The judgment noted that those who carried out the attacks did not involve

the defendant in their execution, but it also made the following observation:

While hearing recommendations for punishment the accused repeatedly stressed that he sought peace. Apparently, as far as he is concerned, the path to peace is paved with the blood of terrorism. The accused wants to represent himself as a 'political figure,' and even declares he is opposed to the killing of innocent people. His declarations contradict his actions... [5]

Politics in Prison

After Arafat's death in November 2004, pressure from Fatah led Barghouti to abandon his prison-based candidacy for PA president. In 2006, Barghouti was one of five signatories to the National Reconciliation Document of the Prisoners, better known as "The Prisoners' Document." Barghouti represented Fatah, while other signatories represented Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). The document called for an independent Palestinian state within the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. It also called for the Right of Return, the release of all prisoners, the establishment of a Palestinian unity government, and an assertion of the right of Palestinians to resist occupation in the post-1967 territories. Israel rejected the document on the grounds that it did not recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish homeland and "justified" the continued use of terrorism.

In October 2011, Barghouti was dropped at the last minute from the list of prisoners to be exchanged for IDF soldier Gilad Shalit, which may have reflected reluctance on the part of Hamas and Mahmud Abbas to see his release ([The National](#) [Abu Dhabi], December 22, 2011; [Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs](#), March 20, 2022). Simultaneously with the prisoner exchange, Barghouti released a 255-page book about his time in prison, which had been written on scraps of paper and

smuggled out by visitors. *One Thousand Nights in Solitude* argued for Palestinian political solidarity and offered a guide for prisoners to resist physical and psychological torture as well as years-long periods of solitary confinement in tiny cells.

Years later, Barghouti led over 1,500 Fatah and Hamas prisoners in a 42-day hunger strike in 2017. The effort did not attract the support he hoped for, and Barghouti's reputation took a slight hit when prison authorities released a video allegedly showing Barghouti eating cookies and snacks in the prison toilet. Minister of Public Security Gilad Erdan described Barghouti as "a murderer and hypocrite who urged his fellow prisoners to strike and suffer while he ate behind their back" ([Ynet](#), August 5, 2017).

Barghouti's latest prison misfortunes began when a statement urging PA security officers to join the fight against Israel appeared under his name last December ([Al-Ayyam](#) [Ramallah], December 10, 2023). Though Barghouti and his wife insisted the message was not his, he was transferred from Ofer Prison near his West Bank home in Ramallah to solitary confinement at Ayalon Prison in Israel. According to Barghouti, the warden punched him on the way out and said: "I will tear you apart!" At Ayalon, he was forced to sleep on the floor, received minimal food, and was stripped naked and handcuffed three times a day while his cell was searched ([Walla](#) [Tel Aviv], January 3; [Times of Israel](#), January 3).

Mandela or Not?

Barghouti's wife, Fadwa Ibrahim, is the leading advocate for his release, likening her husband in 2013 to South African prisoner-turned-president Nelson Mandela. A campaign for Barghouti's release was launched at Robben Island, Mandela's former prison home, with the support of eight Nobel laureates, including former US president Jimmy Carter and South Africa's Bishop Desmond Tutu ([The National](#) [Abu

Dhabi], April 19, 2017). Last August, Fadwa renewed the campaign for Barghouti's release under the title "Freedom for Marwan Barghouti, the Mandela of Palestine" ([al-Sharq al-Awsat](#), August 2, 2023).

Yitzhak Gershon, commander of the division that captured Barghouti, has since urged his unconditional release to lead the Palestinian people: "I say this even though I know he has blood on his hands" ([Haaretz](#) [Tel Aviv], July 5, 2016). Admiral Ami Ayalon, former chief of the Shin Bet domestic security force, and General Ehud Barak, prime minister of Israel from 1999 to 2001, have similarly advocated for Barghouti's release. Others, like former Shin Bet director Avi Dichter, have opposed any comparisons with Mandela, telling advocates of his release that Barghouti "had bought his leadership with the blood of Jews" ([Haaretz](#) [Tel Aviv], July 5, 2016). Complicating comparisons to Mandela is Barghouti's advocacy of peace while refusing to withdraw the possibility of violence if the peace process stalls or is seen as insincere. Armed resistance side-by-side with negotiations is his credo.

Conclusion

For years, Palestinian opinion polls have shown Barghouti easily winning any election in which he faced Abbas or Hamas leader Isma'il Haniyeh ([Haaretz](#) [Tel Aviv], July 5, 2016; [The National](#) [Abu Dhabi], December 21, 2023). Yet Barghouti's "revolutionary" discourse has been described as providing only "generic, short-term and somewhat vague solutions" while failing to provide a long-term strategy. According to this view, "In contrast to the mild-mannered and hyper-cautious Abbas, Barghouti is deemed a remnant of the classical Arafatism; in other words, a romanticized version of a long-gone revolution" ([The New Arab](#), March 2, 2021). Though Hamas may call for his freedom, there is no guarantee that Barghouti would be able to mount a Hamas-PA rapprochement. The current war in Gaza will lead to political upheavals

within the Hamas movement, pitting its foreign-based leaders, such as Haniyah, against those who have remained under bombardment in Gaza.

Given the number of times it has seemed Barghouti's release was imminent, it must be recognized that a hostage negotiation or even a resolution of the current conflict may not involve the release of Barghouti. He remains in prison because there are those—not only in Israel but also in Hamas and Fatah—who fear the effect of his release on their political futures. Nevertheless, he could still be elected PA president while still in prison (if and when PA elections are called), which would create a popular and even international movement for his release. If it is true that real peace can only be achieved with enemies, there may yet be another act remaining for Marwan Barghouti.

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Notes:

[1] Raviv Drucker and Ofer Shelah: **בומרנג השנייה באינתיפאדה המנהיגות כישלון** (*Boomerang: The Failure of Leadership in the Second Intifada*), Jerusalem, 2005, p.80.

[2] Mouin Rabbani: "Towards a War of Attrition in Palestine," *Middle East Report*, No. 218 (Spring, 2001), p.7.

[3] "Marwan Barghouti: Partner for Peace Negotiations or Terrorist?" Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, July 17, 2017, pp. 32-33, https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_21237/E_091_17_1143954519.pdf.

[4] Lisa Hajjar: "The Making of a Political Trial: The Marwan Barghouti Case," *Middle East Report*, No. 225 (Winter, 2002), p.31.

[5] "Marwan Barghouti: Partner for Peace Negotiations or Terrorist?" Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, July 17, 2017, pp. 4, 44, https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_21237/E_091_17_1143954519.pdf.

[info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_21237/E_091_17_1143954519.pdf](https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_21237/E_091_17_1143954519.pdf)

Ikramul Haque: From Madrasa Student to AQIS Recruiter in India and Bangladesh

Iftekhharul Bashar

Executive Summary

- Ikramul Haque, deputy head of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and head of the group's propaganda wing, was arrested in Bangladesh in May 2023.
- His story of recruitment and radicalization highlights AQIS's cross-border coordination and recruitment in India and Bangladesh, particularly through religious education institutions.

Ikramul Haque served as the top leader of the *dawah* (propaganda) wing of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) until his arrest in Bangladesh in May 2023. As a high-value terrorist recruiter in his early 30s, Haque faced at least ten police charges in India. He played a crucial role in recruiting for AQIS in India and Bangladesh (his home country) and expanded al-Qaeda's network in the region ([Prothom Alo](#), July 7, 2023). Haque also allegedly trained AQIS members in India and Bangladesh and served as a liaison between AQIS and Ansar al-Islam—Bangladesh's al-Qaeda chapter, formerly known as the Ansarullah Bangla Team. Haque is believed to have maintained contacts with al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Haque's arrest in Dhaka revealed that he had fraudulently acquired an Indian passport, and his wife had an Aadhaar Card (a voluntary biometric ID

card) from India. Haque's arrest marks a significant development in regional counter-terrorism efforts, mainly due to his close ties to Ansar al-Islam's top leader, Osman Gani (alias Abu Imran) ([Prothom Alo](#), July 7, 2023).

Biography and Radicalization Journey

Ikramul Haque (aliases Abu Talha, Maulana Sabet, Noor Hossain, Milan, and Mansur) originates from the Bororchar Area of Mymensingh District in north-central Bangladesh ([Samakal](#), July 5, 2023). Despite the extremist milieu prevalent in his home district, Haque's radicalization journey likely originated elsewhere. It was during his studies in the country's capital, Dhaka, that he was first exposed to extremist ideologies and subsequently recruited. Moreover, Haque joined AQIS and eventually emerged as a key leader in India rather than Bangladesh.

Born into a modest family with a father who was a farmer, Haque was forced to attend a madrassa due to financial constraints. Demonstrating academic excellence from an early age, Haque pursued his studies at Jamia Islamia Darul Uloom Madania Jatrabari (locally known as Jatrabari Madrassa) in Dhaka. Besides becoming proficient in Bengali, Urdu, Arabic, and English, he also possessed technical knowledge in computers and IT. In 2007, he achieved the top position in the national-level junior madrassa examination and subsequently enrolled in Jamia Arabia Imdadul Uloom (locally known as Faridabad Madrassa) in Dhaka. There, Haque graduated with a Dawra-e-Hadith degree (equivalent to a Masters in Islamic Studies and Arabic) ([Bangla Tribune](#), July 5, 2023). [1]

Continuing his studies at Faridabad Madrasa from 2008 to 2017, Haque became involved in militancy under the influence of one of the teachers, Osman Gani (alias Abu Imran)—the enigmatic emir of Ansar al-Islam. Gani was associated with several terrorist cells operating that occurred in the mid-2010s and facilitated

Haque's journey to India in 2018. Gani is also the one who indoctrinated and recruited him into Ansar al-Islam. With support from Gani's contacts in India, Haque obtained a tourist visa, later fraudulently obtaining an Indian passport under the name Noor Hossain with false family details. An AQIS sleeper cell member named Nannu Mia—who was eventually arrested by the Indian authorities—reportedly also helped Haque obtain Indian identity documents ([Newstime Express](#), September 26, 2023).

Once in India on a tourist visa in 2018, Haque enrolled in the prestigious Darul Uloom Deoband (widely known as the "Deoband Madrassa") in Uttar Pradesh. He was able to use his fraudulent identity documents to obtain admission. During his arrest interrogation, Haque revealed that his involvement with AQIS was facilitated by an individual named Aman while he was studying in the Deoband Madrasa. During his stay in the Deoband Madrassa, Haque came into close contact with many top al-Qaeda militants, developing links with key leaders in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He also had regular meetings with AQIS chief Asim Umar before Umar was killed in 2019 ([Samakal](#), July 5, 2023). Haque reportedly also traveled to Pakistan-administered Kashmir, presumably to meet other senior leaders of AQIS and for advanced training.

In 2020, while he was still a student of the Deoband Madrassa, Haque illegally entered Bangladesh and married Faria Afrin Anika, a resident of Mymensingh District. Two months later, Haque moved to India again, with Anika joining him after a time. Haque indoctrinated and trained Anika, and she eventually joined AQIS's female wing and continued to assist him. Haque created an Indian identity card with fake information for her. In 2023, the couple had a child. Later, Haque reportedly managed to take a job at a madrassa in the Deoband Area in Uttar Pradesh by concealing his identity.

Expanding AQIS in India

Haque engaged in extensive efforts to organize AQIS activities across various regions in India, including West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, and Delhi. He conducted classes both online and offline, targeting newly recruited AQIS members. Haque was particularly effective at disseminating al-Qaeda's ideology among Bengali-speaking Indian Muslims. According to reports, his primary targets were unemployed youth. Consistent with this, in October 2022, the Indian Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) arrested eight AQIS members in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh). During interrogation, they identified Haque as the group's top leader. On May 2023, ATS arrested four more AQIS members from Gujarat, India. The four were reportedly Bangladeshi citizens, and during interrogation, they, too, identified Haque as their recruiter ([ANI](#), July 8, 2023).

During the COVID-19 lockdown, Haque established three cells in West Bengal ([Anandabazar Patrika](#), July 10, 2023). He also rose to the position of deputy head of AQIS and head of the *dawah* wing. His arrest in May 2023, however, followed months of intelligence operations by the Indian police, who had conducted more than 50 arrests across India in a short period (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), March 1). The crackdown against AQIS in India began in March 2022 with the arrest of a prominent Bangladeshi leader. Haque had established cells in various parts of India, and upon learning of the arrests, he fled to Bangladesh with his wife around late 2022 or early 2023. Upon his return, Haque moved to his native village in Mymensingh. He reportedly started to teach there in a madrasa while coordinating AQIS activities in India and Bangladesh ([Kalbela](#), July 6, 2023).

Investigators have indicated that Haque was issuing instructions to militants in India from Bangladesh through various encrypted apps. These included the "Conversation" app for mobile devices and "VirtualBox" for laptops. He was

additionally involved in offline, person-to-person recruitment activities. However, Haque was known to the other Bangladeshi members of Ansar al-Islam as "Maulana Sabet" ([Samakal](#), July 5, 2023).

The Bangladeshi authorities arrested Haque and his wife in the Madertek Area of Dhaka on May 30, 2023. Haque confessed in court to his close contacts with top al-Qaeda militants, to having developed a special security module for the organization's recruitment work, and to having connections with Asim Umar. Forensic tests have shown that Haque advocated for al-Qaeda's ideology in numerous audios, videos, and images sent via encrypted apps. Bangladeshi police officials claimed that uncovering Haque's network saved both Bangladesh and India from a major risk of terrorist attacks ([Samakal](#), July 5, 2023). Meanwhile, multiple cases are pending against Haque in India, where he is considered a top militant leader. Several teams are actively working to apprehend Haque's accomplices and financial network.

Conclusion

Ikramul Haque's arrest highlights AQIS's cross-border coordination and recruitment in India and Bangladesh, particularly through religious education institutions. His radicalization journey exposes the exploitation of certain madrasas by terrorists for recruitment purposes and underscores the robust collaboration between al-Qaeda members in India and Bangladesh. While Haque's arrest is a positive development in the sense that both Bangladesh and India have been able to respond to a significant threat, it does not signal the *end* of that threat by any means. For instance, Haque's radicalized wife was released on bail, which will necessitate measures to prevent further extremist activities. The noteworthy cross-border networking of AQIS also emphasizes the importance of regional collaboration in counter-terrorism efforts.

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Notes:

[1] It is worth noting that in 2016, Faridabad Madrassa gained attention when one of its teachers was arrested by Bangladeshi authorities for purportedly recruiting for Ansar al-Islam ([Kaler Kantho](#), June 28, 2016). In 2017, a former student was apprehended for his role in the targeted killings of secular bloggers and activists in Bangladesh ([Bangla Tribune](#), April 8, 2017).