

# MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

## Personalities Behind the Insurgency

p.1

Brief

*Jacob Zenn*

p.2

Mullah Noorullah Noori: Afghan Taliban Leader Questions Border with Pakistan

*Syed Fazl-e-Haider*

p.4

Yunus-Bek Yevkurov: A Profile of Russia's New Ingush African Corps Leader

*Andrew McGregor*

p.8

Abdul Mateen Taha: Islamic State Fugitive Figurehead in India

*Animesh Roul*

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### Maalim Ayman: A Post-Mortem of al-Shabaab's Commander Tasked with Attacking Kenya

*Jacob Zenn*

#### **Executive Summary**

- Maalim Ayman, one of al-Shabaab's key commanders, was killed death in a US drone strike in December 2023. Ayman led the group's push into Kenya. With Ayman's death, the group's ability to launch attacks like the ones against the Westgate Mall in 2013 or the Manda Bay Airfield in 2020 has declined.

In the last decade, al-Shabaab has grown from being a threat primarily to Somalia into a source of concern for Kenya as well. Kenya's northern region—home to a large Somali population—has suffered from a number of major al-Shabaab attacks. One of the key commanders in al-Shabaab's push into Kenya was Maalim Ayman. Before his death in a US drone strike in December 2023, the US government had placed a \$10 million bounty on Ayman ([US Department of State](#), January 5, 2023).

Ayman's death is the culmination of a three-year hunt.

Ayman is best known as the mastermind behind the January 2020 attack on Manda Bay Airfield in Lamu, Kenya. It should be noted that this attack, though high-profile, did not necessarily reflect Ayman's abilities. The death of one US soldier and two American contractors had more to do with the base being woefully underprepared to defend against such an attack than cunning on Ayman's part ([Garowe Online](#), September 27, 2023; [Department of Defense](#), November 29, 2021).

Three years after the attack, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited the Manda Bay Airfield and commended the progress that US and Kenyan forces had made since 2020 ([US Air Forces in Europe - Air Forces Africa](#), September 29, 2023). This was, in part, the result of additional US troops that had been brought into Kenya to prevent future attacks ([Army Times](#), January 23, 2020). It had been reported previously that Ayman had been killed sometime after the base attack, though he had, in fact, survived until December 2023 ([Nation \[Kenya\]](#), November 27, 2020).

Ayman's final location was in the city of Jilib in southern Somalia ([The Star](#) [Kenya], December 23, 2023). Jilib is 370 kilometers southwest of Mogadishu, making it an ideal staging point for cross-border attacks from Somalia into Kenya. Jilib is also close to the village of Haramka, where al-Shabaab commander Abdullahi Nadir was killed by US forces in October 2022. This emphasizes the extent to which the area has been an al-Shabaab stronghold, as well as its history of serving as a base for the group's incursions into Kenya ([X/@MOISomalia](#) [Somali Ministry of Information, Culture, & Tourism], October 2, 2022).

Ayman's death is likely to degrade al-Shabaab operations in Kenya. Ayman led Jaysh Ayman (literally, "Army of Ayman"), an al-Shabaab unit responsible for terrorist attacks and general operations in Kenya. Ayman himself was known to provide specialized training in the bush to new recruits ([The Star](#) [Kenya], July 13, 2015; [US Department of State](#), November 17, 2020). Further, through his own group, Ayman commanded a number of dangerous foreign fighters from across the region, including militants from Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Yemen ([Hiiraan Online](#), December 22, 2023).

While the threat of al-Shabaab activities in Somalia and Kenya has not gone away, the group's ability to launch attacks like the ones against the Westgate Mall in 2013 or the Manda Bay Airfield in 2020 has declined. Nevertheless, US and Kenyan counter-terrorism forces must remain vigilant to ensure that a new militant does not rise to take Ayman's place.

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## **Mullah Noorullah Noori: Afghan Taliban Leader Questions Border with Pakistan**

*Syed Fazl-e-Haider*

### **Executive Summary**

- Mullah Noorullah Noori has recently questioned the validity of the Durand Line, the internationally recognized border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, raising tensions between Kabul and Islamabad.
- Noori is currently Minister for Borders and Tribal Affairs in the Taliban government in Afghanistan, and served under the past Taliban government in the past. He was captured by the United States in 2001 and spent 13 years in Guantanamo Bay.
- A respected Taliban official and confidante of former Taliban Supreme Leader Mullah Omar, Noori's comments may influence Afghan policy toward hostilities with Pakistan.

Mullah Noorullah Noori has served as Minister for Borders and Tribal Affairs in the Taliban government in Afghanistan since September 7, 2021. However, he has been a part of the Taliban movement for decades ([Afghan Ministry of Borders & Tribal Affairs](#), February 3). He was considered one of the closest people to the Taliban supreme leader, Mullah Omar, during the group's first regime from 1996 to 2001 ([Modern Diplomacy](#), July 8, 2023). Now, as a minister, Noori plays a role in resolving the more than 400 tribal feuds across Afghanistan ([Pajhwok](#), September 20, 2023). Perhaps more importantly, he has been making official statements on issues

with key geopolitical implications, especially with Pakistan.

### **Early Life and Career**

Noori was born in 1967 in Shahjoy District of Zabul Province in southern Afghanistan and is the son of Maulavi Ghulam Omaruddin. He received his primary and secondary education in different madrassas in Afghanistan and can speak Arabic and Afghan Dari ([Afghan Ministry of Borders & Tribal Affairs](#), February 3). At a young age, he joined the Taliban in their drive to capture north in the late 1980s ([Afghan Bios](#), July 21, 2023). He then commenced his political career within the framework of an Islamist political party.

Following the departure of Soviet forces in 1989, Noori served as governor of Balkh Province during the Taliban's first administration from 1996 to 2001 and then was governor of Laghman and Baghlan provinces in northern Afghanistan ([Outlook Afghanistan](#), January 5, 2012). Following the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, when Taliban soldiers fell into the hands of the Northern Alliance, Noori negotiated a surrender deal with General Rasheed Dostum ([Dawn](#), December 2, 2001). This deal was intended to allow other Taliban fighters to receive safe passage to leave northern Afghanistan in return for laying down their arms. However, Taliban prisoners rioted while being held in Qala-i-Jangi, a fortress located near Mazar-i-Sharif in northern Afghanistan, leading to violent reprisals by Northern Alliance fighters with the help of US forces. At least 450 Taliban prisoners were killed in the battle ([Radio Free Europe](#), November 29, 2001).

Noori was arrested in December 2001 and handed over to US forces. He was then detained in Guantanamo Bay, where he spent 13 years ([Afghan Ministry of Borders & Tribal Affairs](#), February 3). He was then among the five Taliban leaders, or "Taliban Five," who were released in 2014 by the United States from Guantanamo in a swap deal for US soldier Bowe Bergdahl ([Al](#)

[Jazeera](#), June 1, 2014). Noori relocated to the Taliban's "political office" in Doha in 2014 ([Modern Diplomacy](#), July 8, 2023). In 2018, Noori was designated as a member of the political office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and became a member of its leadership council ([Afghan Ministry of Borders & Tribal Affairs](#), February 3). In this role, Noori participated in the Taliban's peace talks with the United States in Qatar, which resulted in the eponymous agreement in 2020 and the subsequent US withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan in 2021 ([Tolo News](#), November 12, 2019).

### **Noori's Geopolitics**

On January 27, Noori visited the Torkham border crossing, which connects Afghanistan's northeastern Nangarhar Province to Pakistan's northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. He claimed that the border between Islamabad and Kabul is "still unclear" and affirmed that Afghanistan does "not have a formal border with Pakistan and there is no zero point as well. This is an imaginary line between us." He further stated that "Afghanistan does not recognize the Durand Line on the grounds that it was created by a British colonial regime to divide ethnic Pashtuns" ([Anadolu Agency](#), January 28). The Durand Line was established in 1893 in a treaty between Britain and Afghanistan and forms the basis for the modern internationally recognized border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Pakistan called Noori's remarks regarding the Durand Line a subject of contention. In addition, Islamabad stressed the non-negotiability of the border. Foreign Office spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch, for example, asserted that the border has "never been on the agenda between Pakistan and Afghanistan and will never be" ([Dawn](#), February 2).

Besides the border issue, in December 2023, Noori described Pakistan's decision to deport Afghan refugees as "cruel." Referring to Pakistan, he stated:

The neighboring country has made a very cruel and unkind decision which is in contrast with all international law and manners. One of the reasons it made such a decision is that they thought Afghanistan has a new administration with low capacity and that it may be unable to control it ([Tolo News](#), December 14, 2023).

In 2023, Pakistan gave a November 1 deadline for all unregistered Afghan refugees to leave the country either voluntarily or by force. Islamabad's planned deportation of more than a million Afghan refugees is aimed at pressuring the Taliban government to stop providing safe harbor to the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban. Pakistan also alleges that the TTP has been using Afghan nationals in terrorist attacks in Pakistan ([Al Jazeera](#), October 6). In 2022, when Pakistan launched an airstrike in Afghanistan's Khost Province to target the alleged hideouts of TTP, Noori visited the province to meet the injured people and families of the victims. During this visit, he refuted Pakistan's claim about TTP hideouts on Afghan soil ([Bakhtar News](#), April 20, 2022).

## Conclusion

Noori has witnessed both the rise and fall and rise again of the Taliban in Afghanistan over the past two decades. As a senior Taliban leader, he is considered competent and qualified to issue policy statements on regional and global issues. Having spent his whole life serving the ideological cause of the Taliban movement, Noori's turning point was his release from Guantanamo. On that occasion, Mullah Omar exclaimed, "I extend my heartfelt congratulations to the entire Afghan Muslim nation, all the mujahideen and to the families and relatives of the prisoners for this big victory" ([Al Jazeera](#), June 1, 2014). After a life dedicated to fighting the United States,

Noori has become a thorn in the side of Pakistan, too.

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## Yunus-Bek Yevkurov: A Profile of Russia's New Ingush African Corps Leader

*Andrew McGregor*

### Executive Summary

- GRU Colonel-General Yunus-Bek Bamatgireyevich Yevkurov has been tasked with taking over Russia's operations in Africa from the Wagner Group. Proven and effective, he will be a formidable threat to Western interests in the region.
- Yevkurov is a Muslim Ingush from Russia's North Caucasus region and the current Russian deputy minister of defense. Yevkurov is a trusted functionary with a distinguished career, adept at both diplomacy and military operations.
- After making a name for himself in the Yugoslav wars, Yevkurov served in the Second Chechen War and proved himself an efficient administrator, leading Ingushetia back from the brink of civil war and economic collapse from 2009–2018.

With the mysterious death of Yevgeny Prigozhin and his top aides in an August 2023 plane crash near Moscow, in many ways, Russia's Wagner Group experiment came to an end (see [Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), October 12, 2023). Shortly before this, in

June, the private military company and its infamous leader shocked the world by leading an abortive mutiny (see *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, [July 11, 2023](#), [July 24, 2023](#)). There was, however, much to salvage in the wake of Wagner's demise, especially in Africa. In the Sahel and beyond, a mix of cooperation, intimidation, and manipulation succeeded in establishing Russian influence at the expense of France and the United States.

The task of reorganizing Wagner operations in Africa and restoring obedience to the Kremlin has been given to Russian military intelligence (the GRU). [1] More specifically, Wagner is now in the hands of GRU Colonel-General Yunus-Bek Bamatgireyevich Yevkurov, a Muslim Ingush from Russia's North Caucasus region and the current Russian deputy minister of defense. A trusted soldier with a distinguished military and political career, Yevkurov will oversee Wagner's successor in Africa—the newly created Russian Africa Corps (*Afrikanskiy korpus*).

Yevkurov was born in Tarskoye, an Ingush village now within the borders of the Republic of North Ossetia–Alania. However, he grew up in the Ingushetian town of Malgobek. Possessing both diplomatic and military skills, Yevkurov has acted on behalf of Russia in Abkhazia, Azerbaijan, North Ossetia, Chechnya, Ingushetia, and other parts of the North Caucasus and has focused on counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency. Like nearly all Ingush, Yevkurov is a Muslim, and specifically, he is a follower of the North Caucasian Kunta-Haji Kishiev branch of the Qadiri *tariqa* (school) of Sufism (see [North Caucasus Weekly](#), April 10, 2009). However, as a former Soviet officer, Yevkurov remains an advocate of official secularism, which he does not see as being in conflict with one's own personal observance of Islam.

### **Kosovo and Chechnya**

Yevkurov began his military career in 1982 with the Soviet Naval Infantry and earned his airborne wings several years later. He

remained in the military after the Russian Federation succeeded the USSR, coming to international attention as an officer in May–June 1999 while serving with the Russian peacekeeping mission in Bosnia. Russian troops were part of the NATO-led Stabilization Force (SFOR) there, but demonstrated their independence in an operation that nearly brought NATO and Russia to blows and earned Yevkurov the title of “Hero of the Russian Federation.”

A GRU special forces major at the time, Yevkurov led a team of 18 GRU commandos into Kosovo in May 1999 in a secret operation. The effort was designed to pave the way for a Russian seizure of the Serbian-held Slatina Airbase just ahead of the arrival of a NATO column and Kosovo-Albanian militias. Under NATO pressure, Serbian forces were withdrawing from Slatina (part of Pristina International Airport), which was the only airstrip in Kosovo capable of handling large military transports. Once Yevkurov had established the way, a small Russian force of 15 BTR-80 armored personnel carriers and 200 paratroopers raced over 300 miles through the mountains of Bosnia and Kosovo to arrive at Slatina only hours ahead of unsuspecting British and Norwegian troops. Upon arrival, Western forces were astonished to find the base in Russian hands ([RIA Novosti](#), February 17, 2017; [Russia Today](#), June 11, 2019).

A potentially explosive standoff followed, but was defused after British Lieutenant General Mike Jackson disobeyed an order from American NATO commander General Wesley Clark to use force to expel the Russian troops. [2] Within days, Russian and NATO troops began to cooperate by allowing both forces to use the airbase. The daring operation revived a demoralized Russian army and signaled to NATO that post-Soviet Russia was still a force in Europe and was willing to take political and military risks to prove it. The incident became the subject of a fictionalized film, *The Balkan Line*, in which Yevkurov served as an adviser.

By 2000, Yevkurov was deeply involved in the Second Chechen War (1999–2009) as commander of the 217th Guards Airborne Regiment. His personal courage was displayed during a reconnaissance mission when he and his escort came across a group of Russian prisoners being held by Chechen insurgents. Having dispersed their guards, Yevkurov and his men found themselves surrounded by Chechen reinforcements. Yevkurov laid down covering fire, allowing wounded paratroopers and 12 Russian prisoners to escape before carrying a wounded soldier to safety. [3]

### **Leader of Ingushetia**

After serving as deputy head of the intelligence department of the Volga–Ural Military District, Yevkurov was appointed by then-President Dimitri Medvedev on October 30, 2008, to a five-year term as the third leader of the Ingush Republic (within the Russian Federation). Yevkurov replaced the deeply unpopular Lieutenant General Murat Zyazikov, under whom the republic was spinning out of control. In addition to economic challenges and entrenched corruption, Yevkurov was faced with a deteriorating security situation involving Islamist militants, organized crime, urban gun battles, suicide bombings, and decades-old blood feuds ([Gazeta.ru](http://Gazeta.ru), March 12, 2009). Most importantly, Yevkurov was expected to restore order and bring Ingushetia back from the brink of all-out civil war. In this, he succeeded, but the effort was difficult. In 2019, Yevkurov stated that, “For five years I woke up in the morning, picked up a machine gun and went to fight. Scold me as you wish, but agree [on] one thing: we have emerged from the war” ([Novaya Gazeta](http://NovayaGazeta), June 26, 2019).

Force was not the Ingush leader’s only weapon, however. Negotiations and appeals to the common interests of the Ingush were offered as alternatives to repressive violence. Yevkurov even promised to intercede on behalf of the militants if they turned themselves in

([Caucasian Knot](http://CaucasianKnot), July 19, 2014). As for the practice of blood feuds, Yevkurov acknowledged their ambiguous status in Islam: “Shari’a does not deny blood feud; Shari’a even welcomes it. But at the same time, Shari’a welcomes forgiveness more” ([Novaya Gazeta](http://NovayaGazeta), April 19, 2018).

Yevkurov’s efforts to restore order in Ingushetia did not please everyone. During a wave of assassinations, Yevkurov was himself targeted by a suicide bomber on June 22, 2009. As Yevkurov’s motorcade drove down the highway outside the provincial capital of Magas, his security detail failed to follow protocol and allowed a Toyota with Moscow license plates to approach his armored Mercedes. Packed with explosives and metal shrapnel, the Toyota driver detonated a directional bomb as he came alongside the Ingush leader’s car, instantly killing a police escort and inflicting serious wounds to Yevkurov, his cousin Ramzan (the driver), and his brother Uvais (former head of security). The survivors were transported for urgent surgery to Moscow (where Ramzan died), and Yevkurov suffered severe damage to his skull, lungs, and liver, as well as two fractured ribs and burns to his face ([Interfax](http://Interfax), June 22, 2009; [RIA Novosti](http://RIANovosti), June 23, 2009). Demonstrating enormous strength, Yevkurov was back at work in September 2009.

Identifying corruption as a major cause of the Ingush republic’s unrest, Yevkurov began his tenure by sacking the existing cabinet and forgoing a ceremonial inauguration as the republic’s president. He secured a federal aid package worth nearly \$1 billion over six years to help develop the republic’s stagnant economy, asserting that this was the key to diverting youth from extremism. However, the issue of corruption persisted and eventually included accusations against Yevkurov himself and his extended family. Ingush society is built around *teip*-s (clans) governed by councils of elders. The practice of prioritizing assistance to fellow members of a specific *teip* can, unfortunately, also encourage the

institutionalization of corruption, nepotism, and other abuses. Confronted in a 2019 interview with his inability to rein in corruption, Yevkurov wearily responded: "Well, where can I get other Ingush?" ([Novaya Gazeta](#), June 26, 2019).

As the republic's president, Yevkurov was also forced to deal with the volatile confrontation between traditional Ingush adherents of Sufist Islam and the growing number of Salafists, who adhere to the "authentic" Islam practiced by the first four generations of Muslims. Yevkurov angered the traditionalists by challenging the prevailing view in Russia that Salafism was synonymous with terrorism. In 2016, for example, he disputed claims by Imam Adam Shakhidov, who was an adviser to Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov on religious issues, that two leading Ingush preachers were dangerous Salafists leading believers into extremism. He stated, "If a person does not infringe on anyone's interests, does not impose his views on anyone, does not call for extremism or other radical measures, then he should be allowed to observe the spiritual practice that is closest to him ... We should be trying to unite people rather than to divide them" ([Lenta.ru](#), May 17, 2016; [Ingushetia.ru](#), May 19, 2016; [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty](#), May 27, 2016). In Yevkurov's view, peaceful Salafists were merely exercising their religious rights. Jihadists were another matter: "I don't consider them Muslims. Why? Because the devil in their soul has simply won. They kill each other, even in sacred places, they kill each other, hiding behind interpretations of Islam..." ([Caucasian Knot](#), July 19, 2014).

### **The Border Issue**

In 2018, Yevkurov and Ramzan Kadyrov signed an agreement defining their mutual border. Under the Soviets (who deported both the Ingush and Chechen populations to Central Asia from 1944 to 1957), the line was shifted frequently. This was, however, of little importance until the breakup of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) in 1991.

At that time, Chechnya sought independence, while the Ingush joined the new Russian Federation. Yevkurov regarded the new demarcation as a simple and necessary administrative measure and thus failed to seek public input. He was thus surprised by the angry demonstrations that followed when many Ingush became convinced he had ceded large tracts of their ancestral lands to Chechnya. However, much of the opposition was fueled by clan rivalries and pre-existing land disputes related to the redevelopment of Magas ([TASS](#), October 17, 2018; [Novaya Gazeta](#), June 26, 2019). After months of unrest, Yevkurov shocked many in his administration by stepping down on June 24, 2019. He stated, "Because we are divided today, each of us faces a choice. Personal interests—or the interests of the native republic ... I urge all interested parties to make their choice. I made my choice" ([Novaya Gazeta](#), June 26, 2019).

### **The Wagner Mutiny**

President Vladimir Putin appointed Yevkurov as deputy defense minister one month after he stepped down from his role as Ingush president. This coincided with Yevkurov's promotion to lieutenant general. In December 2021, he was further promoted to colonel-general ([RBC.ru](#), December 8, 2021).

After the Wagner mutineers took the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don unopposed in June 2023, Yevkurov and GRU major-general Andrei Averyanov were filmed conversing outdoors with Prigozhin, apparently as his prisoners. A transcript reveals an uncomfortable discussion, with the Wagner leader complaining Russia's military leaders were sending "his guys" into a "meat-grinder" and announcing his intention to "get" Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valeri Gerasimov. In the video, Prigozhin grumbles repeatedly that Yevkurov is addressing him with the informal "ty" rather than the formal "vy," implying Prigozhin's inferiority ([Meduza](#), June 24,

2023). Nonetheless, the incident was a humiliating moment for both Yevkurov and Averyanov—and no doubt required an explanation to Putin later on.

## **Africa Corps**

Following Prigozhin's death in August 2023, Yevkurov was sent to Syria to encourage officials there to advise Russian Wagner fighters to either leave Syria or join Russia's forces (*Asharq al-Awsat*, August 28, 2023). In December, Yevkurov received his latest assignment: command of the GRU's new Russian Africa Corps and oversight of its absorption of former Wagner fighters (*Vedomosti* [Moscow], December 22, 2023).

Yevkurov was joined in September by the same GRU major-general, Andrei Averyanov, who had been a part of his conversation with Prigozhin months earlier. Yevkurov and Averyanov set out on a tour to meet the leaders of African countries where Wagner operated, including Libya, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and the Central African Republic, in order to reassure them of Moscow's continued support. Averyanov is the former chief of the GRU's 29155 unit and specializes in covert operations, including sabotage and assassinations. He also appears to have been designated Yevkurov's number two in the Africa Corps and has seen prior service in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Ukraine, Moldova, and Crimea.

## **Conclusion**

Yevkurov's Africa Corps will have no armored divisions and will be forced to fight a very different war from its German namesake. Under GRU leadership, the Africa Corps will have greater access to resources, but will be expected to be self-sufficient in many ways. This means Wagner-style associations with business interests will likely continue, although disentangling these interests from the Wagner network will be challenging. General Averyanov's presence ensures that information manipulation and covert activities will continue to play a large part

in expanding Russian influence in Africa. Improving battlefield performance will be a priority for Yevkurov. Thus far, Russian fighters have not proven any more effective in eliminating Sahelian terrorist formations than their French predecessors. Tackling Islamic State (IS) operatives in Africa may also take on a new intensity following the March 22 IS terrorist attack in Moscow (see *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 26).

Yevkurov is not a buffoonish "chef" like Prigozhin. Unlike the latter, he has the full backing of Russia's military establishment and will not have to beg for ammunition or restrict himself to the use of contractors and mercenaries, especially in leadership positions. Proven and effective, a Muslim operating in Muslim parts of Africa, he will be a formidable threat to Western interests in the region.

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## **Notes:**

**[1]** The official title of this agency is now Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (*Glavnoye upravleniye General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii*), but the older and simpler GRU designation (*Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenie*, Chief Intelligence Office) is still commonly used.

**[2]** Anthony King: *The Transformation of Europe's Armed Forces: From the Rhine to Afghanistan*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp.79-80; Mike Jackson: *Soldier: The Autobiography of General Sir Mike Jackson*, London, 2008, pp.292-295.

**[3]** Robert Bruce Ware: "Chechenization: Ironies and Intricacies," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 15(2), Spring/Summer 2009, p. 166.



## Abdul Mateen Taha: Islamic State Fugitive Figurehead in India

Animesh Roul

### Executive Summary

- Abdul Mateen is the fugitive leader of Islamic State (IS) in al-Hind, and his network has been behind a series of bombings in southern India in the last five years. While his group has been seriously degraded by the National Investigation Agency (NIA), India's equivalent of the FBI, a recent string of bombings and attempts suggest that IS in al-Hind has continued to adapt.

On October 23, 2022, a suicide car bomb exploded outside the Kottai Eswaran Hindu Temple of Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu State, India. The perpetrator, Jameesha Mubeen, died in the explosion. A month later, on November 19, 2022, a homemade improvised explosive device (IED) detonated in an auto-rickshaw in the city of Mangaluru in Karnataka State. The driver, Mohammed Shariq, was burned in the attempt. After the explosion, Shariq was arrested, and investigations revealed that he plotted the violent act under the guise of a Hindu identity to avert any investigation ([Udayavani](#), November 20, 2022).

The Islamic Resistance Council (IRC), a then-unknown Islamist group, claimed responsibility for Shariq's Mangaluru blast. In a statement, the IRC disclosed that the actual target of their operation was the Hindu Kadri Manjunatha Temple, indicating that the bomb detonated prematurely and the mission was not successful. While threatening future attacks, the IRC's communiqué decried the rising influence of

"saffron extremists," which is a reference to right-wing Hindu activists in Karnataka. In this manner, the group highlighted the religious dimension of the violence ([New Karnataka](#), November 25, 2022).

Several months after both Mubeen's and Shariq's bombing incidents, Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) also claimed responsibility for the two men's attacks in the March 2023 issue of its flagship English-language magazine, *Voice of Khorasan*. [1] In a four-page article, Abu Yasir al-Hindi, which may be a *nom de guerre* for an Indian-origin IS operative, noted that the attacks in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka states were revenge attacks to honor Islam and to terrorize unbelievers. He also threatened additional revenge strikes intended to establish sharia in India.

Investigations into the two explosions also found that Shariq and Mubeen both had met before and were part of a growing jihadist network called Islamic State (IS) in al-Hind. This group's leader was Abdul Mateen Taha. Abdul Mateen's network has been active in southern states of India, with headquarters in the city of Bengaluru ([Times of India](#), December 5, 2020; [DaijiWorld](#), November 22, 2022).

### An Elusive Extremist

Police investigations have confirmed that Abdul Mateen is the fugitive leader of IS in al-Hind. His involvement in several violent attacks was also confirmed by police. This includes the June 2014 murder of a Hindu right-wing leader, KPS Suresh, in Chennai, Tamil Nadu State ([Headlines Karnataka](#), December 26, 2020). Abdul Mateen had previously attended army school and entered into the world of extremism sometime around 2014, when IS's influence expanded in India. Originating from Theerthahalli in Karnataka, his involvement in militancy has since been varied. He has focused on spreading IS's ideology, recruited vulnerable Muslim youths, procured arms and explosives, and established hideouts for carrying out

terrorist attacks ([Indian Express](#), August 7, 2014; [Hindustan Times](#), January 9, 2020).

Abdul Mateen was also the son of a retired Indian army man Manzoor Ahmed and studied information technology and engineering in Bengaluru. According to his mother, after completing his degree, he worked in a private broadband company in Bengaluru for some time ([Hindustan Times](#), November 22, 2022). However, Abdul Mateen absconded from his workplace in Bengaluru in 2019 and is believed to have fled to Dubai or Qatar. Before Manzoor Ahmed's death in August 2023, he urged his son to return home, surrender to the police, and face justice for his crimes ([The Hindu](#), August 14, 2023). Abdul Mateen did not return.

### **The Brain Behind IS in al-Hind**

In early 2019, Mehboob Pasha, Khaja Mohiuddin, and Abdul Mateen established IS in al-Hind in Bengaluru. Abdul Mateen has remained in charge of the group's recruitment and financing operations in South India. Abdul Mateen and his group are also linked to the January 8, 2020, murder of Tamil Nadu special sub-inspector (SSI) Y Wilson ([Times of India](#), January 14, 2020). The National Investigation Agency (NIA, India's equivalent of the FBI) arrested several al-Hind operatives, including Pasha and Mohiuddin. The individuals were identified as having been inspired by IS ideology and part of an Islamist gang that targeted Hindu leaders and police personnel in the region. After forming IS in al-Hind, they reportedly opened an office in Bengaluru and scouted a group of 17 people to conduct attacks in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu states. Abdul Mateen was instrumental in procuring explosives, arms, and ammunition for that purpose ([Republic World](#), November 21, 2022). However, in 2020, the cell was uncovered by the NIA, which foiled their plans to establish a new IS province in southern India.

The NIA learned more about Abdul Mateen's activities from several other

arrested operatives, such as Saleem and Zayed, who also had participated in several meetings. At these assemblies, top leaders would inspire young people to support IS operations in Afghanistan and Syria ([DaijiWorld](#), May 14, 2020). In September 2023, the NIA and Delhi police arrested Arafat Ali at the Delhi airport. Ali was an IS operative returning from Kenya. Ali reportedly confirmed his associations with Abdul Mateen and involvement in IS operations in India ([Hindustan Times](#), September 14, 2023).

Abdul Mateen was also the mastermind behind pro-jihadist graffiti in late 2020 in Mangaluru. Police arrested Shariq and Muneer Ahmed earlier for this graffiti campaign ([Decaan Herald](#), November 28, 2020). Some of the graffiti also mentioned that IS would deal with the rise of the Hindu right wing in India ([Headline Karnataka](#), December 26, 2020). The NIA, which interrogated Shariq, informed the media that he received financial support from Abdul Mateen, who was directly in touch with IS handlers outside of India. Funds were transferred through channels in the darknet and crypto-currency ([Punjab Newslines](#), December 17, 2022). Following the placement of graffiti, Abdul Mateen had planned violence on December 19, 2020, to avenge the deaths of two Muslim protesters. The protesters had lost their lives in police fire during the December 2019 Anti-Citizenship Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) protests ([India News](#), December 19, 2019; [Kannada Prabha](#), December 22, 2020). Such plans did not come to fruition, however.

### **Return of IS in al-Hind's Terror Campaign?**

On March 1, an improvised explosive device blast left nine people injured in a Bengaluru restaurant. The NIA suspects Abdul Mateen and his network's involvement in the blast. Given the methods of assembling and detonating the explosives, there is believed to be a strong connection between the latest blast and the

November 2022 pressure cooker bomb explosion in Mangaluru.

Abdul Mateen, along with other fellow IS operatives Musabir Hussain and Colonel (a *nom de guerre*), is suspected of involvement due to the striking similarities in the two operations. The arrest of Shabbir Ahmed, a key suspect from Ballari District in Karnataka, has shown progress in the investigation. These findings emerged after the NIA announced a cash reward of 10,000 rupees (approximately \$12,000) for any information about the bomber ([United News of India](#), March 13; [The Hindu](#), March 03).

Several weeks following the restaurant explosion, Bengaluru police also uncovered a stash of explosives, including blasting gelatin and detonators, concealed within a parked vehicle near a school in Chikkanayakana Halli locality. Further investigations are underway to understand the scope and intent behind the storage of explosives in a densely populated area of the city ([India TV News](#), March 19). Nonetheless, this operation may also have been the work of Abdul Mateen.

## Conclusion

The arrest of several IS in al-Hind operatives, and particularly close associates of Abdul Mateen, underscores a critical step in unraveling the violent intentions of IS within India. NIA's anti-terror operations in the country reveal a broader subversive strategy by Abdul Mateen, which focuses not only on executing attacks like in Bengaluru but also on the recruitment and radicalization of vulnerable Muslim youths (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), March 1). The case of Abdul Mateen and IS in al-Hind's anti-India activities underscore the enduring and adaptive threat of Islamist militancy in India. Although currently limited, his capacity for recruitment, fundraising, and orchestrating attacks in southern India will necessitate enhanced security measures and surveillance. The Indian security apparatus, and especially the NIA, will seek

to disrupt and neutralize networks like those of Abdul Mateen in the country.

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## Notes:

[1] Abu Yasir al-Hindi, "A Message to the Inhabitants in the Land Occupied by Cow and Mice Worshipping Filths," *Voice of Khurasan*, No. 23, pp. 3–7.