

# MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

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## VOLUME XV, ISSUE 7 | July 2024

### Anton 'Lotus' Yelizarov: Wagner Leader MIA in Mali

*Jacob Zenn*

In August 2023, Anton "Lotus" Yelizarov, a 42-year-old Russian commander from Novorossiysk, took over the combat side of the Wagner Group's military operations. This occurred after the mysterious "plane crash" near Moscow that killed the group's infamous leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin (see [Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), October 12, 2023; [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty](#), August 20, 2023). Prigozhin's reputation as a leader inspired sufficient loyalty from Wagner fighters to lead them into mutiny, and even before then he reached folk hero status for his populist persona and actions in Ukraine.

Lotus's high place in Wagner's post-mutiny hierarchy stems partially from Prigozhin granting him the epithet "conqueror of Soledar" in honor of his key role in the bloody five-month battle to seize the eastern Ukrainian city. In addition, he appears to have been involved in the group's training of Belarusian forces following the mutiny ([European Radio for Belarus](#), February 6). As a result, those formerly loyal to Prigozhin could be more

#### **Executive Summary**

- Anton "Lotus" Yelizarov, a 42-year-old Russian commander who took over the combat side of the Wagner Group's military operations may have been killed or captured in a disastrous ambush on Russian forces in Mali in late July.
- Wagner's successor in Africa, the African Corps, appears to be faced with two options: abandon the mission to protect the Malian junta or double down on efforts to combat the increasingly coordinated local Tuareg-separatist and Jihadist militant groups.
- Yelizarov was one of the few remaining pre-mutiny Wagner leaders of note, having been hailed by Prigozhin as the "conqueror of Soledar." While he may have been considered a successor to Prigozhin at some point, he lacks the charisma or anti-establishment outlook of the group's former leader.

likely to accept Lotus as his successor than an outside figure. At the same time, the Russian defense establishment views Lotus as a less threatening figure, given his relative lack of charisma or anti-establishment outlook when compared with Prigozhin ([Robert Lansing Institute](#), November 15, 2022).

As a result of Lotus's senior role in Wagner, the U.S. Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) placed him on the "Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List" (OFAC, January 1). Among other restrictions, this would prevent Lotus from accessing the U.S. financial system and conducting business with Americans. However, it is unlikely he would be involved with any such enterprises in the first place. Wagner is known for engaging in illicit economic activities in the areas where it operates, especially in Africa ([U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), May 30).

Lotus is known for his actions in the Central African Republic (CAR), where he had a leading role in Wagner's operations ([The Africa Report](#), January 20, 2023). Just before his death, Prigozhin released a video from Africa—some believe it to have been the Malian desert—in which he declared that his goal was to make Africa "more free" ([YouTube/Al Jazeera English](#), August 22, 2023). Lotus appears to have followed Prigozhin to Africa and remained there, which would have meant that he was far away from Russian territory at the time when the plane carrying Prigozhin, Wagner co-founder Dmitry Utkin, and other major figures connected with the group went down.

While it has not yet been confirmed, Lotus may have recently been killed or captured in battle in Mali. In late July, the Africa Corps—Wagner's African remnants, reorganized under the Russian Ministry of Defense and led by Yunus-Bek Yevkurov (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), April 18)—suffered devastating losses in an ambush by Tuareg separatists and Jihadists in northern Mali (see [Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), July 31). These groups are likely

to have been supported and trained by Ukraine, which has promised to aid groups in Africa that are engaging Russian forces (see [Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), July 31). Russian Telegram sources connected with Wagner report that as many as 80 Russian mercenaries were killed, with some 12 fighters in captivity ([Ukrainian Military Center](#), July 28). There has been no confirmation of Lotus's status: many Telegram sources mourn his death, while others suggest that he was captured and may have already been exchanged ([Voice of America](#), August 1).

The recent disaster in Mali will not halt Wagner/the African Corps's operations in Africa, regardless of whether or not Lotus was killed. Still, major defeats damage an organization's morale, and after the loss of Prigozhin and much of Wagner's leadership, those that remain are finding fewer and fewer commanders from the group's pre-mutiny era to turn to. The fact that 2,400 French troops failed to end militancy in Mali over almost a decade suggests that the approximately 1,000 Russian troops engaged in counter-insurgency efforts there are unlikely to succeed. Moreover, the African Corps's willingness to commit atrocities appears likely to inflame the situation, and the disastrous ambush has broken the aura of invincibility that had contributed to Russian and pro-regime propaganda ([Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty](#), July 31).

It would appear that the Russian Africa Corps is faced with two options in Mali: abandon the mission and withdraw, as they did after a string of failures in Mozambique ([The North Africa Journal](#), September 11); or redouble their efforts, accepting that more Russian mercenaries will die as the situation between Mali's military junta and Tuareg and Jihadist militant groups continues to deteriorate.

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## Rawa Majid and Ismael Abdo: Swedish Gangsters Revealed as Iranian Proxies

Herbert Maack

### **Executive Summary**

- In late May, Mossad attributed two attacks against the Israeli embassy in Stockholm to Iranian-backed criminal networks active in the country. The individuals at the core of these networks are Rawa “The Kurdish Fox” Majid and Ismael “The Strawberry” Abdo.
- The decision by Swedish intelligence to confirm these allegations represents a clear shift in the country’s approach toward Iran, denying Tehran the plausible deniability it has relied on in past incidents.
- Majid and Abdo both fled Sweden for Turkey, where they each managed to acquire citizenship. Majid then ran to Iran, where he appears to have been offered the choice to collaborate with the regime or go to jail. Abdo is out on bail in Turkey, and his reasons for working with Iran are not known.

In late May, the Israeli national intelligence service Mossad publicly attributed two attacks against the country’s embassy in Stockholm to Iran and its two Sweden-based criminal network proxies. These Israeli intelligence investigations were opened after two separate incidents: a hand grenade was discovered inside the embassy’s grounds on January 31, and on May 17, shots were fired near the same

location ([Times of Israel](#), May 30). These events have provided a rare glimpse into the murky convergence of organized crime and state sponsorship of terror in Sweden.

### **Rise of Majid and Abdo’s Criminal Networks**

At the center of Israeli allegations are two individuals: Rawa Majid, who is known as “The Kurdish Fox,” and Ismael Abdo, nicknamed “The Strawberry.” **[1]** Majid was born in Kermanshah, Iran in 1986, but when he was one month old his Iraqi Kurdish family moved to Upsala, Sweden, where he grew up. In his teens, Majid began a career in crime by selling stolen goods. Later, he moved into drug trafficking. After eight years in prison for drug-related offenses, he received a threat to his life from a rival crime group, causing Majid to flee from Sweden in 2018 to Türkiye. Majid managed to become a Turkish citizen through the country’s “golden visa program”—the investment in this case being the purchase of a \$300,000 villa—despite there being an existing Interpol warrant out for his arrest ([Cumhuriyet Daily](#), March 4). Subsequently, Majid moved to Iraqi Kurdistan, where he changed his name to Miran Othman and built up an organized crime group called Foxtrot.

Foxtrot is suspected of high-volume drug trafficking in and to Sweden. Foxtrot’s point man in Sweden, Ismael Abdo, was sentenced in 2016 to a five-year prison term for weapons- and drug-related crimes. Shortly after his release, Abdo was again accused of drug trafficking, but he managed to avoid further jail time by escaping to Türkiye in 2022 ([Dagens Nyheter](#), May 30).

In 2023, a confrontation between Foxtrot and a Stockholm-based gang known as *Dalennätverket* (“The Dalen Network”) led to spiraling violence. **[2]** This was followed by an internal dispute within Foxtrot on how to take over the drug market in Sweden. A dispute then emerged, which led to a split between Majid and the 34-

year-old Abdo, who established his separate group, Rumba ([Sveriges Television News](#), September 19, 2023).

With their leaders in exile, rival gang members started to kill each other in a brutal turf war that spread across Sweden and into Türkiye. A turning point was reached when Majid oversaw Abdo's mother's killing in Upsala in September 2023. This was followed by an attempt to kill Majid's own mother-in-law, who survived. Two teenage boys were detained for the killing of Abdo's mother, which is consistent with both groups' use of teenagers in attacks. According to Swedish police, by spring 2024, the balance of power had shifted in Abdo's favor ([Dagens Nyheter](#), March 14).

### **The Iranian Connection**

Majid escaped to Iran in September 2023 after Swedish authorities requested that Turkish officials extradite him to Sweden. The choice was well timed, as Swedish-Iranian relations had recently hit rock bottom. Iran, for example, detained several Swedish nationals, including Swedish EU diplomat Johan Floderus in April 2022 for espionage charges. Floderus was released on June 16 in exchange for the Iranian Hamid Noury, who was serving a life sentence in Sweden for his role in killing political prisoners ([EU Diplomatic Service](#), December 12, 2023; [Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), January 17; [Swedish Prime Minister's Office](#), June 17).

In Iran, Majid was arrested in October 2023, where authorities allegedly gave him a choice between prison time or cooperation with Iran's Ministry of Intelligence, or *Vezerat-e Ettela'at Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran* (VAJA, previously MOIS) ([Dagens Nyheter](#), May 30, 2024). From Iran, Majid has continued to direct his criminal network in Sweden, including diverging at least some of its capabilities to conduct terrorist attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets on behalf of Iran. The January 2024 hand grenade attack was conducted, according to

authorities, by Foxtrot ([Times of Israel](#), May 30).

Less is known about the link between Abdo and Iran, including how, when, and why the relationship was forged in the first place. Nevertheless, the investigation into the shooting incident close to the Israeli embassy in May led the authorities to believe that the shooting was carried out by Abdo's network, Rumba ([Times of Israel](#), May 30). Abdo, who also has obtained Turkish citizenship, was arrested at the end of May in Adana but was since set free on bail for 20,000 lira (roughly \$600) ([Haberler.com](#), May 27).

### **Conclusion**

The Swedish Security Service (SÄPO) confirmed Israeli claims that Iran is using Swedish organized crime networks as proxies. The SÄPO counterintelligence head, Daniel Stenling, stated that the organization was able to prevent several cases in recent years where there was concrete evidence that assassination plots linked with Iranian security services utilized criminal networks in Sweden as proxies ([Sveriges Television News](#), June 1). The linking of Majid and Abdo to attacks on Israeli targets marks the first time, however, that the names of criminals and organizations recruited by Iran have been revealed.

For Iran, using Swedish criminal proxies has provided some measure of plausible deniability. The public manner in which Israel and Sweden have now exposed Iran through Majid and Abdo is likely an attempt to rob Iran of this deniability. This might also render the two organized crime groups useless to Tehran, which would leave Majid stranded in Iran and Abdo in Türkiye.

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### **Notes:**

**[1]** Abdo's colorful nickname stems from his participation in the illicit market of roadside strawberry stands in Sweden, through which he laundered more than \$12

million a year. Sweden's produce market has become a surprisingly lucrative vector for money laundering. Authorities now warn that these illegal vendors have become fronts for funding brutal gang wars that have taken Sweden from having one of the lowest rates of gun-related fatalities globally to one of the highest in Europe in merely a decade ([The Week](#) [United Kingdom], June 26; [Newsendip](#), July 27).

**[2]** The "Dalen Network" refers to a local criminal network involved in drug trafficking active around Stockholm.

## **Nathan Bawm: The Artist-Turned-Militant Mastermind in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts**

*Khandakar Tahmid Rejwan*

### **Executive Summary**

- Nathan Bawm is a former artist and activist who transformed an organization named the Kuki-Chin National Development Organization into the present-day Kuki-Chin National Front and the Kuki-Chin National Army (KNA), an ethnic militant group that stands in opposition to a key peace accord in eastern Bangladesh that ended a two-decade insurgency.
- Bawm, whose location is not known, has been successful in making the KNA an effective fighting force, notable for its ability to attack rival groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and ambush Bangladeshi security forces. This may have been made possible by transnational support from the broader Kuki-Chin community in India and Myanmar.
- Bawm's demands have changed over time from a separate Kuki-Chin nation to an autonomous zone across three countries with its own governance structure. To achieve this, he has demonstrated a willingness to pragmatically work with groups like Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya (JAFHS), an al-Qaeda affiliate.

Since the historic 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord was signed between the Bangladeshi government and Shanti

Bahini insurgents, Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) have seen relative peace and stability ([The Daily Star](#), December 2, 2022). The accord marked the end of nearly 20 years of insurgency in the CHT. However, after roughly 25 years of peace, CHT has witnessed a renewed insurgency led by a banned ethno-nationalist group named the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF), which is locally known as the "Bawm Party" ([The Business Standard](#), May 17, 2023).

The KNF stands out for carrying out bold actions against law enforcement agencies, looting banks, and using remote violence, such as detonating improvised explosive devices (IEDs), to wage irregular warfare. The group has a political wing, which goes by the name of KNF itself, and an armed wing called the Kuki-Chin National Army (KNA). The group also possesses an intelligence wing named the Information and Intelligence Branch (IIB), displaying an unusual degree of organizational sophistication. The KNA seeks to secure the autonomy of the regions of Bangladesh inhabited by six ethnic groups: the Bawm, Pankhwa, Lusai, Kiang, Mro, and Khumi ([Prothom Alo English](#), April 6).

The mastermind and founder of the KNF is Nathan Bawm, a former artist and activist who transformed an organization named the Kuki-Chin National Development Organization (KNDO) into the present-day KNF. He shares his last name with the Bawm ethnic minority group that lives in the CHT. Little is known about Nathan Bawm, who has a reputation for allying with various hill-based organizations before turning his back on them. Under Bawm's direction, KNF is harassing local civilians, killing rival hill-based groups, and targeting Bangladeshi government forces ([The Business Standard](#), April 7).

### **Early Life and Politics**

Born in 1980, Bawm was raised in the neighborhood of Eden Para in Ruma County, Bandarban District, Chittagong Province. Bawm's family was impoverished, and he was the youngest of

all six children. Bawm grew up seeing the lack of development of the hill-based ethnic groups ([Somoy News](#), April 5). It was this struggle that motivated him to join the ranks of Pahari Chhatra Parishad (PCP), which was the hill-based student organization of Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS). PCJSS was the political arm of Shati Bahini, an ethnic militant group led by the famous insurgent figure M.N. Larma ([The Business Standard](#), April 7).

Bawm attended college in Dhaka and was finally admitted into the Fine Arts Faculty of Dhaka University (DU), the country's foremost educational institution. It is alleged that he failed to qualify for the DU entrance exam, instead gaining admission due to PCJSS directly lobbying for Bawm to represent the underdeveloped community of the hills at the school. This demonstrates Bawm's strong connections with PCJSS, even before he became involved with militancy. Later, in 2000, Bawm designed a sculpture of M.N. Larma at Larma Square in Khagrachhari, the capital of Khagrachhari District, Chittagong Province, for which Bawm gained some renown as an artist. After graduation, Bawm wrote various historical and ethnographic articles and books on the Bawm people, which solidified his stature as an advocate for minority causes. In 2002, he founded the Bawm Literature Forum to preserve Bawm literature ([Barta 24](#), April 10).

Subsequently, Bawm formed the KNDO in 2008. This further burnished his reputation as an activist and philanthropist in the Bawm community. It also offered Bawm a chance to develop his leadership skills. In 2017, Bawm transformed the KNDO into an armed insurgency group named the KNF. In addition, Bawm attempted to compete in the 2019 national elections, though his paperwork was rejected on the grounds that he was ineligible to run ([Bangladesh Pratidin](#), April 8). This fueled Bawm's disdain for Bangladesh's electoral system, which he believes is biased and unfair toward ethnic minorities.

## **Bawn's Beliefs**

The ethnic communities in the CHT that Bawn claims to represent are lagging in education, employment, and social development opportunities compared with larger ethnic groups in the area like the Chakma. Nathan believes that PCJSS, which is predominantly led by Chakma community members, betrayed and failed to advance the rights of other, smaller ethnic groups, thereby obstructing the development of said communities ([Daily Industry](#) [Bangladesh], April 6). In light of this, Bawn considers other CHT groups like PCJSS splinter Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (M.N. Larma) (PCJSS-M.N. Larma), the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF), UPDF splinter United People's Democratic Front (Democratic) (UPDF-D), and the Marma Nationalist Party potentially hostile to his goals. This has led the KNF to target and kill members of the disparate CHT groups ([Dhaka Tribune](#), April 7, 2023).

Bawn also asserts transnational unity should exist among the Kuki, Chin, and Bawn people living in India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. Bawn initially advocated for a new Kuki-Chin state consisting of nine CHT counties, though he later downgraded his demands to a separate administrative system for the same lands, to be called the Kuki-Chin Territorial Council (KTC). In doing so, Bawn is rejecting the 1997 peace accords and denying the legitimacy of the existing CHT governance structures, which include Hill District Councils and the Chittagong Hill Regional Council ([Prothom Alo English](#), April 13).

Initially, Bawn primarily opposed the Chakma dominance in the CHT's administration and posed no direct challenge against the government. Bawn later turned against government security forces, however, alleging that they had cooperated with the Chakma-majority CHT leadership. Bawn found that pressuring the government was a good tactic for the KNF to gain visibility.

## **Formulating the KNF's Modus Operandi**

Through his popularity and influence, Bawn enrolled hundreds of volunteers and recruits for the KNF cause. Most of these have been youths, and many are women ([New Age](#), April 9). They are primarily given weapons and explosives training. Utilizing his cross-border ethnic ties, Bawn even sent a large number of KNF members to train in the camps of ethnic rebels in Myanmar's Chin and Kachin states. KNF rebels have also received shelter and training from Kuki armed groups in Mizoram, India ([The Diplomat](#), April 29). Bawn has used Facebook as a platform for KNF agitation and recruitment. To help provide a rallying point for his cause, Bawn created a map and flag for the proposed state/autonomous region. Bawn set up the IIB to conduct intelligence activities for the KNF. This was revealed by "Captain Fleming" of KNF, who suggested that Bawn had relocated to Switzerland in an interview ([Prothom Alo English](#), April 17).

Among other things, Bawn is an irregular warfare strategist. He primarily employs two methods to engage the KNF's enemies. The first tactic involves the KNF engaging in frontal assaults against rival tribal groups directly using small arms. The KNF has successfully killed many of its rivals in the CHT in this way. Another method involves the use of IEDs in ambushes against government forces. This has allowed the KNF to successfully injure and kill a number of members of the otherwise-superior Bangladeshi army ([New Age](#), April 19).

To finance the KNF, Bawn has allegedly relied on foreign funding from the broader Kuki-Chin community in India and Myanmar ([Dhaka Tribune](#), February 22, 2023). He established connections with a banned Islamist al-Qaeda affiliate named Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya (JAFHS) and trained them in exchange for money. This was detected when government forces launched an operation in the hills to arrest KNF trainers and JAFHS

militants in 2022 ([Prothom Alo English](#), October 12, 2022).

Bawm secured funds and brought attention to his group by directing several bank robberies in early April in Ruma County, Bandarban District. These incidents were notable because they highlighted the KNF's ability to operate and strike fear into the civilian population in broad daylight, even with considerable military and security personnel having been deployed to the region ([Dhaka Tribune](#), April 3). The KNF went so far as to attack the Thanchi District police station after the robbery, which displayed an increased willingness to engage Bangladesh's security forces directly ([New Age](#), April 5). At the time of these attacks, the KNF was actively engaged in peace talks with the government; the incident proved to be the final straw for the government, which launched a full counter-insurgency effort to bring the KNF to heel.

## **Conclusion**

Since the April attacks, the KNF has struggled to fight the government ([The Daily Star](#), April 8). Despite Bawm's marriage to a nurse employed at a government clinic, Dhaka has not yet located him ([Dhaka Tribune](#), April 11). This would suggest that Bangladeshi intelligence should have kept closer tabs on Bawm for some time now, as his continued survival suggests that he was either not under surveillance or was otherwise able to escape it. Likewise, earlier actions undertaken against the KNF may have been able to prevent the current insurgency.

Bawm's current whereabouts are unknown. As previously stated, Bawm may be hiding in a European country like Switzerland or the Netherlands, or he could have taken refuge in Mizoram State in India. This latter theory has been proposed by individuals within the Assam Rifles, an Indian paramilitary force responsible for maintaining order in the country's northeast ([Prothom Alo English](#), April 17).

Bawm's ability to innovate, agitate, mobilize youth, and engage in irregular warfare combine with his reckless attitude and unpredictable personality to make him one of the most dangerous militant leaders in Bangladesh. Bawm's adeptness in establishing transnational ties between the KNF and other cross-border militant rebels and Islamist groups means that he is a regional threat as well.

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## Abbas Betani: Mid-Level Commander Who Mediated Between Pakistani Taliban Factions Killed

Riccardo Valle

### **Executive Summary**

- On May 27, Pakistani security forces conducted a raid that appears to have killed Abbas Betani, a commander in the Pakistani Taliban (TTP). While Betani was a prominent middle-level commander at the time of his death, members of his *tashkeel* (fighting unit) from 2005 appeared to coordinate with his forces operationally, despite having joined other, potentially adversarial factions within the TTP over time.
- Despite a formal denial of an alliance between the mainstream TTP and groups like the Majlis-e-Askari and the Hafiz Gul Bahadur faction by their leaders, propaganda from all three lamented Betani's death. This may suggest increased jihadist unity in the face of Pakistan's "Operation Azm-e-Istehkam" counter-insurgency campaign, which began in June.

On May 27, Pakistani security forces conducted a raid in Tank District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. According to the Pakistan Armed Forces' Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the raid led to the death of ten militants, but further details were not provided ([Dawn](#), May 27). However, following the ISPR press release, militants affiliated with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), or Pakistani Taliban, issued condolence messages

across multiple social media platforms to eulogize TTP commander Abbas Betani, who had been killed in the operation.

On June 7, the TTP media series dedicated to its slain militants, Rasm-e-Mohabbat, issued a poster that featured Betani and acknowledged his death. On June 28, the TTP also published a video episode of Rasm-e-Mohabbat that paid tribute to Betani, providing some previously unknown background details about his life. Betani exemplifies the fluid nature of TTP militants, who often transition from one group to another according to their prominence on the ground. These individuals are not only jihadists but also warlords—an important dynamic to understand when assessing the alliances between militant groups. Betani was a top TTP commander, whose ability to move between militant factions allowed the TTP to increase its influence on the ground.

### **Who Was Abbas Betani?**

Betani, whose real name is Hassan Khan, was born in 1991 and was originally from Umar Khan Kalay, which is located approximately 10 kilometers from Tank Bazaar in Tank District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan. Betani underwent military training in 2004 under future TTP commander Azmatullah Mehsud, which he first put into practice by leading a *tashkeel* (fighting unit) in Afghanistan in 2005. According to the TTP's video, Betani immediately joined the TTP with his own co-fighters when it was first launched in 2007. Betani was a major TTP commander and carried out several operations, becoming particularly active under the leadership of the TTP's second *emir*, Hakimullah Mehsud ([TOLOnews](#), November 2, 2013). During this period, approximately ten members of Betani's family died as a result of different forces' operations in Tank District, where his family lived.

Between 2008 and 2009, Abbas Betani fought against a pro-Pakistan Taliban militant commander, Turkistan Bettani, in

Tank District. He later traveled to other cities in Pakistan, including Peshawar, Karachi, and eventually Miranshah in the tribal North Waziristan District. **[1]** In 2014, when Operation Zarb-e-Azb was launched by Pakistan's Army, Betani joined his cousins Mawlana Dawood and Hamza in order to oppose Pakistan's counter-insurgency efforts ([Dawn](#), June 16, 2014).

### **Mistaken Identity**

On March 15, the TTP issued a statement announcing that a group led by "Maulvi Abbas" from the Darazinda Area of Dera Ismail Khan District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province had pledged allegiance to the TTP's current leader, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud ([The Khorasan Diary](#), March 15). Some accounts on X associated with pro-Pakistani security forces speculated that Maulvi Abbas was actually Abbas Betani. On the same day, the TTP issued a second statement arguing that the group had established two new "shadow districts" in its "shadow province" of Dera Ismail Khan: Dera Ismail Khan City and Darazinda. The text further argued that Maulvi Abbas had been appointed district governor of Darazinda ([The Khorasan Diary](#), March 15).

Given existing suspicions that Maulvi Abbas was Abbas Betani, this announcement led some to believe that it was Betani who had really been appointed district governor. However, this allegation appears to be incorrect. According to TTP members who fought alongside Betani, he was never posted to Darazinda, or more generally, to Dera Ismail Khan District. On the contrary, since Betani's activities had always revolved around Tank District, his companions in the TTP stated that Betani had been put in charge of Bettani Tehsil in Lakki Marwat District, where he had been active since 2014. Further refuting the original claim, the same sources stated that Betani had never left the TTP, so there would have been no need for him to pledge allegiance again to the group's *emir*. **[2]**

These claims were supported by the publication of the TTP's organizational

structure in early 2024. In the section that outlined the administrative structure of the Bannu shadow province, Betani was listed as the head of the sub-provincial Tajauri Area inside Lakki Marwat District. It would be unlikely for the TTP to appoint Betani to run two multiple areas inside separate districts, much less shadow provinces. As such, it can be assumed that Abbas Betani and Maulvi Abbas were not the same person.

### **Overlapping Loyalties**

On April 16, TTP accounts on social media circulated a picture of a meeting that allegedly occurred in an undisclosed area inside Tank District on the previous day. The meeting involved numerous TTP leaders: Betani—referred to here once again as the shadow governor of the Tajauri Area of Lakki Marwat District; Maulana Umar Malang, the shadow economic manager of Tank District (under the Dera Ismail Khan shadow province, also substantiated by the aforementioned organizational chart); Abdul Baseer, TTP shadow governor of Jandola Area of Dera Ismail Khan District (likewise featured in the organizational chart); and another TTP commander below Betani, Commander Ghufuran (alias Talha), who was killed on May 18 during an attack against security forces in Tank District.

Three low-level commanders were also present, including Tariq Kochi, Shahid Betani, and Granit Betani. Having all previously served under Betani, these men represented a different part of the TTP. They had pledged allegiance on March 31 to Akhtar Khalil Mansoor of the group Majlis-e-Askari, which is a part of the Hafiz Gul Bahadur faction. Under Akhtar Khalil Mansoor, they had all been given control over their own respective shadow territories: Granit Betani was appointed to Tank District, Shahid Betani was charged with the Upper Tank Area, and Tariq Kochi was made responsible for the Gomal Area.

In spite of appearances, this meeting did not reflect a structural alliance between the

TTP and Hafiz Gul Bahadur's faction. On Facebook, Abdul Baseer and the TTP's top military commander overseeing Dera Ismail Khan, Saiful Rehman, issued a statement to the commanders who had participated in the meeting and all militants operating in the Tank and Jandola districts. The message asserted that while unity among the TTP's factions was important—and more so in this case, as the fighters in Tank and Jandola belong to the same tribe—the TTP was nevertheless not allied to the Hafiz Gul Bahadur-aligned commanders. Some TTP members complained the leaders of Majlis-e-Askari (including their three former associates) had begun to operate more like thieves than jihadists. An undisclosed senior TTP member likewise substantiated this, denying that Akhtar Khalil's militants and the TTP had agreed to work together in the Tank District under Betani, despite allegations to that effect online. [3]

It is important to consider the April 15 meeting in the context of a local game of warlord/jihadist politics between factions of a group with overlapping allegiances. Betani has been able to act as a key figure linking the TTP and Hafiz Gul Bahadur's Akhtar Khalil group. One of Betani's former companions was able to confirm that relations between the commanders that met were in fact cordial. [4]

In April, videos shared on social media by members of the TTP, the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group, and the Akhtar Khalil group featured Betani roaming around Tank and Dera Ismail Khan districts with 20–30 militants in his *tashkeel*. One of the videos notably includes Granit Betani, and Tariq Kochi is visible in another. This suggests quite strongly that at the very least, members of Betani's *tashkeel* were still actively taking part together in operations together, despite notionally having broken away from Betani's faction of the TTP. At present, Betani's *tashkeel* is believed to comprise some 30–35 militants.

## Conclusion

After Betani's death, all TTP factions circulated videos and pictures of Betani. Some of these pictures also included his family, such as his sons Shahid and Hafiz Muhammad, who were around eight and ten years old at the time of his death. While Betani was a prominent middle-level commander, it is notable that cooperation between TTP factions is becoming more visible. In the wake of the Pakistani Army's June offensive against militants, "Operation Azm-e-Istehkam," there is a chance that such cooperation will evolve into a united front against the government's security forces ([The Diplomat](#), June 25).

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## Notes:

[1] Interview with a former affiliate of Abbas Betani, conducted remotely, June 28. Senior journalist Kiran Butt managed to set up the interview through her contacts.

[2] *Idem*.

[3] Interview with TTP member who knew about the meeting, conducted remotely, June 12.

[4] Interview with a former affiliate of Abbas Betani, conducted remotely, June 28. Senior journalist Kiran Butt managed to set up the interview through her contacts.