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Abu Shujaa: West Bank's Most Wanted Militant Killed in Israeli Operation

Jacob Zenn

Executive Summary

- The most wanted militant in the West Bank, Mohammed Jaber, better known as "Abu Shujaa," was eliminated on August 29, 2024.
- Jaber's Tulkarm brigade, which had previously proved to be a headache for the Israel Defense Forces in the city of Tulkarm in the West Bank, have been significantly degraded following Jaber's death, though other figures are expected to fill the vacuum.

The most wanted militant in the West Bank, 25-year-old Mohammed Jaber, better known as "Abu Shujaa," was eliminated on August 29, 2024. Jaber met his end at the end of an 18-hour siege by the Shin Bet's

Yamam counter-terrorist unit, which surrounded a mosque in Nur Shams outside his hometown of Tulkarm. In addition to Jaber, the operation killed three other militants ([i24 News](#), August 29, 2024).

In the months before his death, the noose around Jaber and his 50-fighter Tulkarm brigade had tightened significantly. Jaber's brother was killed in December 2023 in Nur Shams. In April 2024, Jaber himself was reportedly killed in an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) operation that killed at least five ([Al Jazeera](#), April 19, 2024). Jaber's death, which was even reported by Palestinian media, would have left his militant group leaderless ([X/@ItayBlumental](#), April 21, 2024).

It came as some surprise, then, when Jaber surfaced at the funeral of his fighters who were killed in the raid. At the event, Jaber defiantly declared that the "resistance" against Israel would continue. According to Jaber, several Israeli soldiers were also killed during the Tulkarm raid ([The New Arab](#), April 22, 2024). Surrounded by his guards, Jaber predicted that the fighting with Israel "will not end until we claim victory."

Jaber gave an interview before his death with the Hezbollah-affiliated al-Mayadeen media wing. In it, Jaber acknowledged that even though the IDF would eventually assassinate him, “generations will come after me and continue the path of Abu Shujaa” ([X/@SuppressedNws](#), August 29, 2024). The isolated nature of the Tulkarm Brigade in the West Bank makes it unlikely Jaber ever received significant—much less substantial—funding or resourcing from Iran or, more specifically, Hezbollah. Nevertheless, Jaber clearly saw his fight as aligned with these groups, likely a precondition for being interviewed by al-Mayadeen. Jaber’s fealty to Iran was also demonstrated by his quoting of Ayatollah Khomeini on social media ([X/@Bloomingrana](#), May 24, 2024). This reflects that Jaber was generally non-sectarian in his approach and sought a unified anti-Israel front.

Jaber’s prediction came true in the aforementioned late August 2024 IDF operation, which ended when Israeli forces fired a missile at the house where he and several other militants were hiding ([The Palestine Chronicle](#), August 29, 2024). The weeks following Jaber’s death saw increased pressure on the Tulkarm Brigade by the IDF, including an airstrike on a suspected brigade hideout by an F-16 that killed 18 ([Al Jazeera](#), October 18, 2024). While the Tulkarm Brigade failed to avenge his death in the immediate aftermath, it is likely that another leader will take Jaber’s place and assume the mantle of the “resistance” in Tulkarm, as he foresaw.

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Commander Muneeb: The Mind Behind the TTP’s Media Transformation

Osama Ahmad

Executive Summary

- Chaudhry Muneeb Ur Rehman Jatt, better known as Commander Muneeb, is a former al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) leader who revolutionized the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan’s (TTP) recruitment and propaganda efforts.
- The close coordination between al-Qaeda and its former leaders and the TTP, reflects a dangerous trend, which may offer the former the opportunity to rebuild its strength in the region.

An individual known as “Commander Muneeb” took over the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan’s main propaganda and recruitment arm, Umar Media, in 2021. Commander Muneeb (also known as Muneeb Bhai), is an ethnic Punjabi senior Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP; sometimes referred to as the Pakistani Taliban) commander whose real name is Chaudhry Muneeb Ur Rehman Jatt. Under Commander Muneeb’s supervision, there have been significant improvements in both the quality and quantity of Umar Media productions, making it a sophisticated propaganda and recruitment machine ([X/@abdsayedd](#), May 27, 2023).

Commander Muneeb was previously part of the five-member media commission that operates Umar Media. However, due to his effective media and communication strategies and effective handling of Umar Media, the TTP eventually promoted him to

the position of its Minister of Information and Broadcasting in January 2024 ([X/@abdsayedd](#), January 4, 2024). Commander Muneeb has become a leading TTP ideologue and is highly respected by the group's members.

Commander Muneeb's Background: From al-Qaeda to the TTP

Before joining the TTP, Commander Muneeb was a member of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and was a close associate of Ustad Ahmad Farooq ([X/@Valle Riccardo](#), May 27, 2024). Farooq served as a deputy emir of AQIS and was the founding head of the al-Qaeda media, recruitment, and propaganda branch for Pakistan until he was killed in a 2015 U.S. drone strike in North Waziristan, Pakistan. Commander Muneeb joined the TTP alongside Ustad Ahmad Farooq and his faction as well as another al-Qaeda-affiliated terror group under Amjad Farooqui in 2021 ([Terrorism Monitor](#), January 5, 2021). Amjad Farooqui was a member of Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) and once served as its representative to al-Qaeda's International Islamic Front.

Commander Muneeb's group is primarily composed of native Urdu-speaking Pakistanis. This has resulted in higher linguistic capabilities at Umar Media, which has achieved a quality and presentation in Urdu resembling al-Qaeda's own As-Sahab Media.

Commander Muneeb's wife is also a jihadist. The TTP's Urdu-language magazine for women, *Banat-e-Khadeejatul-Kubra*, released an interview with his wife in its May 2024 edition. In the interview, she revealed that she belongs to a middle-class Punjabi family, is a university graduate with a bachelor's degree in computer science, and has been living a militant life in the tribal areas for 13 years. She also talked at length about her struggles as a jihadist ([X/@abdsayedd](#), May 27, 2024).

Transforming the TTP's Umar Media and Messaging Strategies

Commander Muneeb drove the TTP's Umar Media to upgrade and innovate. He reconstituted the original audio series of the TTP, the "Umar Radio program," which is now managed by Mawlana Yaseer. Commander Muneeb also initiated a podcast named *Pasoon* (Uprising), which released more than 20 episodes. Each episode features several guests, such as the TTP's shadow ministers or members of different commissions that the group has established ([Oneindia](#), July 18, 2023).

Under Commander Muneeb, the TTP has also expanded its slate of written publications, particularly its magazine called *Mujalla Taliban*. The magazine, founded in 2016, had only published eight issues by 2020. However, between January and June 2023, it published five issues. In June 2023, the TTP also announced the publication of a 10-day newspaper named *Manzil*, which mainly features reports of the attacks carried out by the group as well as editorials dedicated to Pakistan's current affairs ([X/@abdsayedd](#), June 9, 2023). In May 2023, the group also launched the previously mentioned magazine specifically geared toward women, *Banat-e-Khadeejatul-Kubra* ([X/AbdullahKhan333](#), July 17, 2023). Three months earlier, TTP launched a separate magazine for women, *Khawateen Ka Jihad*, which advocated for them to become more involved in jihadism ([X/@khorasandiary](#), March 27, 2023).

Commander Muneeb has also transformed the TTP's messaging strategy. The TTP now carefully crafts and disseminates messages that are intended for both local and international audiences. For instance, the TTP has appealed to the international community regarding the plight of Pakistan's Pashtun and Baloch populations. In particular, the group has successfully highlighted the lack of basic amenities provided by the Pakistani state to these people, specifically referring to water, gas, and electricity. The TTP presents itself as a legitimate group advocating for the well-

being of the Pashtun and Baloch people. In January 2023, the group's messaging focused on economic issues in Pakistan, commenting on the International Monetary Fund's bailout of Islamabad ([Dawn](#), July 10, 2023).

Conclusion

The appointment of al-Qaeda members, such as Commander Muneeb, to senior positions in the TTP suggests a very strong level of coordination and collaboration between the two groups, with al-Qaeda serving as the mentor. This relationship has improved the TTP's technical and operational capabilities, especially with regard to its media and propaganda wings. This trend has serious implications. From their positions at the top ranks of the TTP, former al-Qaeda leaders are being offered the opportunity to regain their influence, potentially threatening not only Pakistan but the broader region as well—and beyond, if the TTP's growth is left unchecked.

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Twan Mrat Naing: The Ruler of Rakhine and Arakan Army Leader

Khandakar Tahmid Rejwan and Scott N. Romaniuk

Executive Summary

- Twan Mrat Naing is the leader of one of the major anti-junta ethnic factions in Myanmar, the Arakan Army (AA). Twan has pushed fairly successfully for a separate Rakhine State under his leadership, either independent or in confederation with a new national government once the junta falls.
- Twan's success stems from a coherent and influential ideological vision, his skill in establishing alliances with other ethnic militias in Myanmar as well as international actors, and his ability to create parallel state institutions in the territories the AA controls.
- Support for Twan internationally has been complicated by the fact that his faction has been accused of having participated in the genocide of the Rohingya. He himself generally refers to the Rohingya as outsiders, despite occasional efforts at reconciliation.
- Similarly, Twan has voiced his unwillingness to submit Rakhine State to the democratic National Unity Government he fights alongside, as he views majority rule as a return to the domination of the Rakhine people by the country's dominant ethnic group.

The tide of Myanmar's civil war shifted significantly in favor of anti-junta forces since Operation 1027 in late 2023. The anti-junta effort was launched by the three major ethnic armed militias that compose the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BA) ([Burma News International](#), December 11, 2023). The Arakan Army (AA), which has since rebranded as the "Arakha Army," is a key member of the 3BA, led by its Commander-in-Chief, Twan Mrat Naing (Twan). Twan is cautious about giving interviews in English, out of concern that his words might be misinterpreted. As a result, he tends not to be widely known, but Twan's tone has been bold in his few public appearances ([Prothom Alo](#), January 2, 2022).

Twan has arguably become the most prominent and successful ethnic armed militia leader in western Myanmar, primarily in Rakhine ([Burma News International](#), February 8). The keys to his success are the implementation of his ideological vision, the building of alliances within Myanmar and internationally, and the establishment of functional local governance structures. Despite this, Twan remains controversial in many circles, due to his staunch nationalism, chauvinism toward the Rohingya, and his denial of rights to non-Rakhine people.

The junta and the AA are both strongly opposed to the Rohingya people and adhere to Buddhist nationalism. Both performed actions against the Rohingya people during the genocide. Currently, the junta is in a vulnerable position. This has pushed them to reverse their position and incorporate the Rohingya into their ranks instead. This effort centers around working to convince the Rohingya that the AA represents the greater evil. Currently, the Rohingya are predominantly being persecuted by the AA.

Twan's Early Life and the Formation of the Arakan Army

Twan was born in 1978 in Rakhine State, Myanmar, and studied at the Technological

University in Sittwe, Rakhine State's capital. He is married to Ma Hin Zar Pru and has two children, though they fled to Switzerland in 2020 after being detained by Thai officials for two months in 2019 ([Narinjara News](#), February 26, 2020). In the same year, Singaporean authorities arrested and later released Ko Aung Myat Kyaw, one of Twan's brothers, for allegedly financing the AA ([The Irrawaddy](#), July 10, 2019).

Twan served as a tour guide in Yangon at a young age and had ambitions to join Rakhine-based nationalist political groups. During his time as a tour guide, he developed a strong national and foreign network. Twan was among many young men who traveled to Kachin in search of lucrative employment in jade extraction operations ([Mongabay](#), April 25, 2022; [Reuters](#), January 15, 2019). Dissatisfied, Twan convinced 25 other men to join him in forming the AA in the town of Laiza in Kachin State on April 10, 2009, invoking Rakhine nationalism and denouncing the exploitation of Rakhine men by the Bamars, Myanmar's largest ethnic group ([The Irrawaddy](#), January 9, 2019).

'Arakan Nation Through the Way of Rakhita'

Twan's political ideology evolves around his vision of forming "An Arakan Nation Through the Way of Rakhita." This mantra expresses his desire to regain the sovereignty of the Arakan State and people, which was lost during the period of British colonial occupation and later at the hands of the Bamars who have ruled the country since its independence ([Center for Arakan Studies](#), July 2). [1] Although Twan is ambiguous about achieving full sovereignty over Rakhine State or the timeline for potential independence, he has affirmed his focus on securing internal sovereignty first. As a first step, his goal is for Rakhine State to become part of a looser confederation within Myanmar in the future ([Burma News International](#), September 15, 2022).

Twan believes that the Bamars of central Myanmar have always exploited the ethnic Rakhines and denied them their rights and proper respect. He thus asserts the need to achieve the AA's goals through action rather than negotiation, trying to evoke a spirit of lost Rakhine glory and independence ([Narinjara News](#), April 11, 2023). As a result, in 2016 Twan formed the political wing of the AA, the United League of Arakan (ULA), based on his vision of "Rakhita." In 2019, Twan also initiated "Arakan Dream 2020" to mobilize the young Rakhine population behind the AA's nationalist cause ([Frontier Myanmar](#), May 2, 2022).

Twan has ideological differences with Myanmar's pro-democratic National Unity Government (NUG), which wants Myanmar to be a federal state rather than a confederation. This is one reason the AA did not participate in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) launched by the NUG after the junta-led coup in February 2021 ([Asia Times](#), January 18, 2022). Despite criticizing the NUG, Twan later assisted the NUG's military wing, the People's Defense Force (PDF). This primarily came in the form of training, arms supply, and joint operations against the Tatmadaw (military)-led State Administration Council (SAC). Twan claims that the foundation of his strategic partnership with the PDF is their common adversary ([The Irrawaddy](#), April 10, 2023). That being said, Twan opposes a democratic Myanmar in which the Bamar majority would continue to have political power over his people.

Internal Alliances and External Liaisons

Twan has always understood the benefits of making friends within and outside of Myanmar. In particular, he has focused on building strong connections and alliances with key ethnic armed militias nationwide. The Kachin-based Kachin Independence Army (KIA) supported the formation of the AA, and the AA has also received armaments from Peng Daxun and his Myanmar National Democratic Alliance

Army (MNDAA), the Shan-based ethnic armed militia ([Militant Leadership Monitor](#), July 31, 2024). Twan also enjoyed support from the MNDAA under its previous leader, Peng Jiasheng—Peng Daxun's father ([Burma News International](#), April 19, 2022). The AA also maintains strong ties with other significant ethnic armed militias, such as the Chin National Army (CNA) in Chin State, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) of Kayah and Kayin states, the United Wa State Army (UWSA; [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), May 21, 2024), and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) of Shan State. In a broader sense, the AA is a part of the two main alliances of ethnic armed militias: the Northern Alliance (established in 2016 by the KIA, TNLA, and MNDAA) and the 3BA (created in 2019 by the TNLA and MNDAA) ([Frontier Myanmar](#), January 30, 2023). Since 2017, the AA has also been a member of the largest ethnic armed militia negotiation group, the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC), which is led by the UWSA and includes five other ethnic armed militias ([Center for Arakan Studies](#), July 2, 2024).

While the AA fought across several states of Myanmar, Twan was able to solidify his position and influence within the group due in part to these contacts. Furthermore, the AA worked with the MNDAA and UWSA to fight the Tatmadaw during the Kokang Offensive in 2015. A long history of such engagements enhanced the AA's credibility as an ally, and Twan leveraged this in order to procure weapons, money, and logistical support from the ethnic armed factions bordering China and Thailand ([Asia Times](#), February 1, 2024).

Twan also secured China's tacit support by allying with pro-Chinese ethnic armed militias such as the UWSA, TNLA, and MNDAA. Beijing, in turn, reportedly supplied the AA with significant armaments in exchange for an agreement not to attack Chinese establishments or projects in Rakhine ([The Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi](#), June 14, 2021). As a result, the AA attacked Indian projects multiple times but

left competing Chinese projects alone ([Light of Catholics in Asia News](#), May 28, 2020). Twan confirmed that he maintains contact with Beijing concerning a variety of military issues. Eventually, a diplomatic solution was sought, and Twan confirmed in February 2024 that the AA would not target any future Indian projects in Rakhine ([The New Indian Express](#), February 16). Twan has also expressed his willingness to work with Bangladesh on border security and Rohingya issues ([Prothom Alo](#), January 2, 2022).

The SAC is still by and large the internationally recognized government of Myanmar, and has designated the AA as a terrorist group and pushed others to do the same. This means that the militia has had to face strong international pressure and restrictions when dealing with other global actors, especially China ([Channel News Independent](#), September 4). Twan, on the other hand, understands the geopolitical importance of controlling Rakhine and has used this card to secure his interests with international actors.

Military Successes and Local Governance

Twan believes Rakhine State needs its own army to survive. Bamars make up the majority of Myanmar's Armed Forces, also known as the Sit-tat or Tatmadaw. Therefore, a separate armed force like the AA is considered necessary by Twan for the Rakhine people's survival and self-defense. Twan's ranks swelled in the period following the junta-led coup in 2021, when the AA took control of key cities, airports, and border towns ([Radio Free Asia](#), August 27). Twan also established the Arakan Army Auxiliary (AAA) to handle law enforcement and intelligence gathering. These are, of course, in addition to the AA's main army, which has at least 30,000 regular troops, many of whom are currently stationed in different states ([Burma News International](#), April 19, 2022). To increase the AA's strength and inclusivity, Twan has also opened its ranks to women.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Twan established a strong shadow government in Rakhine, as well as the Arakan People's Authority (APA), which acts as the region's judicial and administrative system ([Burma News International](#), April 19, 2022). In doing so, Twan ensured the establishment of a proper legal system, something the junta had neglected. He also focused on promoting social security, improving healthcare, educating students, and securing taxes from the local population ([Center for Operational Analysis and Research](#), September 27, 2023). Through all these efforts, he has secured a place of acceptance among the common Rakhine people and ensured his influence over the region from top to bottom. By seizing cities like Paletwa, Twan has solidified the AA's hold on neighboring Chin State, bringing more than half of it under his authority ([The Irrawaddy](#), May 28).

Conclusion

Twan, despite his rising image as the leader of the Rakhine people, is not without controversy. He previously refused to accept the Rohingya people as a valid identity and referred to them as outsiders. The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) accuse his forces of sectarian violence, including the killing of 200 Rohingyas in the town of Buthidaung in Rakhine State ([Prothom Alo](#), August 27). The ARSA and RSO also accuse him of human rights abuses, human trafficking, and drug smuggling ([Mizzima](#), February 10). Genocide scholars have condemned Twan's revisionist view of the former Arakan State's history and disregard for Rohingyas ([Prothom Alo](#), January 9, 2022). Further, Twan has criticized and disregarded the NUG's pro-Rohingya views and suggested that the NUG ought not "meddle" in Rakhine affairs ([Burma News International](#), June 5, 2024). This reflects his two-faced policy of recognizing the need to help the stranded Rohingyas in Bangladesh but denying them a place in building an inclusive Rakhine State.

Overall, Twan Mrat Naing has established himself as the image of “Rakhine Destiny.” This phenomenon is not uncommon in Myanmar, as UNSW leader Bao Youxiang presents himself similarly (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), May 21, 2024). Twan acknowledges the similarities between his dream of creating a Rakhine State and Bao Youxiang’s efforts to build a Wa State. With consecutive victories and increasing influence, Twan has become one of the most formidable and powerful warlords in Myanmar.

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Notes:

[1] The Bamar people are often referred to as the “Burmese” in English, though this introduces a number of complications. The Bamar lent their name to the country they dominated upon independence, and so “Burmese” was for a time the correct demonym for a person from the country of Burma. After the junta seized power and changed the English translation of the country’s name to Myanmar in 1989, the demonym officially became “Myanma” or “Myanma people.” This has not been adopted widely for a number of reasons—ranging from a preference in the English-speaking world for the old terminology, concerns over historical and ethnic implications, as well as questions as to whether or not acceding to the change enhances the junta’s legitimacy. For the sake of the reader, we use Bamar to describe the largest ethnic group, as it is

the most correct and least complicated term available.

General Tariq Saleh: A Thorn in the Side of the Houthis

Michael Horton

Executive Summary

- In Yemen, the internationally recognized government-aligned National Resistance Forces (NRF) are led by General Tariq Saleh, the nephew of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh.
- Saleh’s faction holds a critical chokepoint, which prevents the Houthis from seizing the rest of the country’s Red Sea coastline.
- Saleh leads the most professional faction in Yemen’s civil war, being composed primarily of the country’s elite Republican Guard and Presidential Guard, the latter of which he personally commanded.
- Despite early stumbles, Saleh has proved a successful coalition builder and a popular leader in the territory he controls, largely due to his backing of local infrastructure projects.
- The money that Saleh uses to fund local projects, pay his troops better than other Yemeni factions, and arm his forces largely comes from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Should Saleh lose the support of the UAE or other allies, his faction’s bulwark against Houthi control over all of Yemen’s Red Sea coast could fall.

General Tariq Saleh leads the National Resistance Forces (NRF), which control much of Yemen’s southern Red Sea coast, including the port of Mocha. The NRF,

sometimes referred to as the Guardians of the Republic, are allied with Yemen's Internationally Recognized Government (IRG). Numbering at least 10,000 soldiers, the NRF is critical to preventing Houthi offensives in the southern reaches of the governorate of Hodeidah and the contested governorate of Taiz. Without the NRF and Saleh's leadership of the organization, the Houthis would face few obstacles and would likely seize control of all of Yemen's Red Sea coast.

The NRF Under Saleh's Leadership

Saleh is former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's nephew and previously commanded the elite Presidential Guard. After his uncle was assassinated in December 2017, Saleh escaped from the Yemeni capital of Sana'a and subsequently formed the NRF ([The National](#), January 12, 2018). Unlike most other members of the Saleh family, Tariq Saleh has remained in Yemen and has vowed to both avenge his uncle's death and retake Sana'a from the Houthis. Many former members of Yemen's elite Republican Guard and Presidential Guard who fled Houthi-controlled areas joined the NRF. This includes many officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) with years of experience fighting the Houthis.

Since its formation in early 2018, the NRF, under Saleh's leadership, has broadened its support base. The NRF draws heavily on fighters from the Tihama, the region facing the Red Sea, to fill its ranks. In addition to incorporating many Tihamis into its forces, the NRF also works closely with the Tihama Resistance Forces (TRF), which formed in the wake of the Houthi takeover of Hodeidah in 2014. The TRF is separate, but many commanders are still integrated into the NRF chain of command. The TRF also provides vital intelligence to the NRF. **[1]**

NRF-linked forces played critical roles in the 2018 battle to control the city and port of Hodeidah ([Al Jazeera](#), September 18, 2018). While the Houthis ultimately prevailed following the strategic withdrawal

of the NRF and allied forces from the outskirts of the city in 2021, the NRF stymied Houthi efforts to expand their control in vitally important parts of the governorates of Taiz and Hodeidah ([Middle East Eye](#), November 17, 2021). Since 2021, Saleh has focused on consolidating the NRF's positions while expanding his forces and enhancing their capabilities.

Building an Army

One primary advantage of the NRF over many of the other anti-Houthi forces is that many of its core fighters were formerly members of elite forces. These experienced and well-trained officers and NCOs allowed Saleh to build a potent fighting force rapidly. Many of these men continue to hold senior positions within the NRF and oversee the recruitment and training of new members.

However, Saleh and his senior advisers have also worked to expand the pool of officers and enlisted men, including from a broad range of coastal and highland tribes. **[2]** Coalition building is critical in Yemen, as tribes remain the locus of power in most areas. Saleh and the NRF have suffered from the perception that Saleh and those closest to him are outsiders from the capital, as most of the other key players are fighters from northwest Yemen. Ties with the former Saleh government—which often neglected development in the Tihama, one of Yemen's poorest regions—have also cost Saleh some support.

Saleh has overcome many of these issues through coalition building, allowing him to field a capable armed force representing many of the tribes and communities from Hodeidah and Taiz. The NRF has recruited heavily for its armed forces for much of the last two years. Compared with many other anti-Houthi forces in Yemen, the NRF's recruitment standards are relatively high and well-organized. Men with particular aptitudes, abilities, and community connections are sought out and often trained for specialized roles. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), which maintains a

close relationship with the NRF and Saleh, helps with training and provides critical financial and material assistance ([Newsyemen](#), April 10, 2021). The NRF also benefits from its soldiers being well and regularly paid. This contrasts with other IRG-aligned forces, which suffer from inadequate and irregular pay—often months past due. The NRF’s pay scales mean that it frequently has to turn away prospective recruits and can choose from the best men. [3]

The NRF’s superior organization stems from a clear chain of command. This, too, contrasts with other anti-Houthi forces operating across Yemen. Many of these forces, and even units within the forces, operate outside any clear chain of command. The officers in charge of many of these forces and units run them as if they were private armies—which, in many cases, they are. For example, the Chairman of Yemen’s Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), Rashad al-Alimi, has little or no effective control over the armed forces ([Arab News](#), January 20, 2023). Any order given by al-Alimi would be subject to negotiation between him and the various commanders of armed forces allied with the PLC.

Similarly, Aidarus al-Zubaidi, President of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), technically has supreme authority over multiple armed units. However, except for a few militias operating in Aden, most armed units are first loyal to their commanders. Saleh’s NRF has worked to overcome this tendency by centralizing command and control over all of the forces deployed within the areas the NRF oversees. All of the NRF units ultimately answer to Tariq Saleh.

Countering the Houthis

The NRF’s proximity to some of the most experienced and well-trained Houthi forces demands the efficiency that Saleh and his advisers have built into the NRF. The NRF and the allied TRF occupy territory in western Taiz and southern Hodiedah, which

is critical to preventing a Houthi takeover of the city of Taiz as a precursor to all of Yemen’s Red Sea coast. The NRF’s primary base of operations at the town and port of Mocha on the Red Sea is a vital node for the NRF and allied anti-Houthi forces ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), February 7, 2023). In September 2022, the NRF, with Emirati assistance, completed the construction of an airport at Mocha ([Newsyemen](#), November 24, 2022). The airport serves military and commercial flights, while the port is an essential alternative entry point for supplies and materiel. Both the port and airport are vulnerable to attack by the Houthis missiles and drones. However, the NRF has deployed some anti-drone and low-tech air defense systems. These measures provide some defense but could be easily overwhelmed.

The construction of the airport and other vital civilian infrastructure by the NRF and local authorities is also a crucial part of Saleh’s efforts to counter the Houthis by bolstering local support. The NRF and its political bureau have overseen and supported the construction of new port facilities, civilian housing, as well as water infrastructure and power generation plants ([Sabanews](#), July 2, 2024). The NRF and its civilian partners have also helped construct and repair roads across the areas that they control. These efforts and the relatively high level of security have helped ensure rising levels of local support for the civilian government and the NRF in the territory they control. This support is essential to countering the Houthis, which possess a sophisticated intelligence apparatus that engages local authorities and elders.

Since 2023, the NRF has steadily added to its forces and developed a range of units with more specialized capabilities. The NRF’s frontline positions, especially in the southern part of the governorate of Hodeidah, have been reinforced and are prepared for a layered defense. The NRF now field artillery and, most critically, anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs). However, the NRF forces and positions are all vulnerable to attack by Houthi-launched

missiles and drones. To defend against this threat, the NRF's units are highly mobile and increasingly deploy their own surveillance and armed drones. [4] The NRF also benefits from extensive assistance with intelligence and threat detection from the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Outlook

General Tariq Saleh's NRF are all that stop the Houthis from taking control of the entirety of Yemen's strategic Red Sea coast and most of the governorate of Taiz. The Houthis routinely test NRF defenses across multiple frontlines with sniper and artillery fire as well as drone over-flights. They have also made numerous offers in an attempt to buy off NRF commanders, all of which have been refused. Further, the Houthis devote considerable military and financial resources to engaging with the NRF. They view the NRF as a potent threat.

The NRF's relative professionalism and the increasing focus on community development efforts should continue to bolster recruitment and local support for the NRF and its political bureau. However, without continued support from the UAE and other allies, the NRF's efforts to build martial and civilian capabilities could falter. As the NRF's founder and commander, Tariq Saleh's fate is directly linked with the success or failure of the NRF.

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Notes:

[1] Multiple interviews with Yemen-based analysts (September 2024).

[2] Interview with UAE-based security analyst (September 2024).

[3] Interview with Tihama-based analyst (September 2024).

[4] Interview with Yemen-based analysts (September 2024).