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Yudi Lukito Kurniawan: AQAP-Trained Indonesian Terrorist Arrested

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Executive Summary

- Indonesia captured former Jemaah Islamiya (JI) jihadist Yudi Lukito Kurniawan (YLK) in August 2024. YLK trained with JI veterans and Moro Islamic Liberation Front fighters for many years, but failed to attack the Singaporean exchange in 2015, after which time he remained at large in Indonesia.
- In July 2024, JI's highest-ranking members formally announced that they were disbanding the group, which is expected to reduce the threat of Islamist terrorism in Indonesia.

In August 2024, Indonesian jihadist Yudi Lukito Kurniawan (YLK) was captured by the country's elite Densus 88

counterterrorism unit. YLK operated from the late 1990s on with Jemaah Islamiya (JI), the group that conducted the infamous Bali bombings in October 12, 2002 that killed 202 ([tempo.co](https://www.tempo.co), October 13, 2022). Indonesian jihadist groups like JI are no longer conducting large-scale attacks like in the early 2000s. Moreover, since the fall of the Islamic State's caliphate in Syria in 2019, Indonesians rarely travel abroad as foreign fighters. However, the case of YLK demonstrates that there are still Indonesians operating globally who have ties to JI and Indonesia's pre-9/11 jihadist movement ([tempo.co](https://www.tempo.co), September 2, 2024). His prolific career shines a light on the various pathways Indonesians have taken to partake in the global jihadist movement, and his arrest is indicative of Indonesia's successful efforts to stamp out jihadist groups and their offshoots in the country.

YLK began his career with JI veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War at Camp Hudaibiyah in the Philippines from 1998 to 2000, which was formed as a training center by secessionist Muslim Moro Islamic Liberation Front fighters ([The Sydney Morning Herald](https://www.the-sydney-morning-herald.com), October 2, 2024). After completing his training, YLK returned to East Java in Indonesia, where he joined

another training program, JI's "Muqoyama Badar" (Badr Resistance) Phase 2 ([Jakarta Globe](#), September 3, 2024). This coincided with JI's most lethal attacks, including the Bali bombings of 2002 and 2005 as well as the group's other embassy and hotel bombings in Jakarta ([The Straits Times](#) [Singapore], August 6, 2014).

YLK was first arrested in 2003 for the possession of firearms given to him by one of the convicted Bali bombers ([Jakarta Globe](#), September 3, 2024; [Channel News Asia](#), September 3, 2024). He was released from prison after a short time, however, and subsequently joined Jemaah Anshorut Tauhid (JAT), a JI splinter group. After this, YLK traveled to Yemen in 2012 to join al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). He was among the approximately ten Indonesians who JAT sent to AQAP in Yemen. There, YLK and his fellow jihadists could disguise themselves among the roughly 4,000 Islamic students in the country from Indonesia—while also taking advantage of ties between Yemenis, and especially Hadramawtis, and Indonesians. There is a multi-century history of migration from Hadramawt to Indonesia. Notably, the family of JI's founder, Abubakar Baasyir, is of Hadramawti origin ([Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict](#), June 27, 2024).

While at the AQAP camp in Yemen in 2015, YLK was ordered to travel to Singapore to attack the country's SGX Centre, home of the Singaporean stock exchange ([Deccan Herald](#), September 3, 2024). YLK was arrested and deported when he attempted to enter the country from the nearby Indonesian island of Batam. At that time, JI had Singapore in its crosshairs. For example, before being broken up by Densus 88, another Batam-based cell had plans to bomb Singapore's famous Marina Bay Sands hotel ([The Straits Times](#) [Singapore], June 7, 2017). Following this, YLK was sent back to Indonesia.

YLK remained at large until his arrest in Sulawesi in September 2024. In July 2024, JI's highest-ranking members formally

announced that they were disbanding the group after roughly three decades in operation ([The Soufan Center](#), September 26, 2024). The former leaders further swore their allegiance to the Indonesian government and claimed to have moved away from hardline Islamism ([South China Morning Post](#), July 28, 2024). JI's disbandment may have left YLK vulnerable and easily apprehended, leading to his arrest.

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Hafiz Gul Bahadur: Pashtun Militant Fostering Jihadist Factional Unity Along Pakistan's Durand Line

Sanchita Bhattacharya

Executive Summary

- Hafiz Gul Bahadur is a Pakistani militant who has been active in the region since 9/11. Bahadur has a network of affiliates, called the "Hafiz Gul Bahadur group," which has been involved in a series of attacks on Pakistani forces over the past several years.
- Bahadur's group is believed to be operating out of Afghanistan and is currently aligned with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and the Haqqani Network. However, Bahadur's group maintained good relations with the Pakistani government in the past, to the extent that he was referred to as "the good Taliban" for only targeting American forces in Afghanistan.

Hafiz Gul Bahadur has been a recurring name in Afghanistan and Pakistan's jihadist landscape, especially since the Afghan Taliban capture of Kabul in August 2021 (covered previously in [Terrorism Monitor](#), April 10, 2009). Bahadur's affiliates, operating through the "Hafiz Gul Bahadur group," have been responsible for numerous attacks on Pakistani citizens and security forces, while Bahadur has proved himself an important player in the complex web of different jihadist organizations operating in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and across the border in Afghanistan.

Over time, Bahadur has at one time or another aligned or maintained positive relations with the Pakistani state, al-Qaeda, and the Haqqani Network, as well as both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. After getting swept up in a Pakistani counterinsurgency operation in 2014, Bahadur fully aligned with jihadist elements and relocated to Afghanistan. From there, Bahadur has used his extensive connections to launch attacks across the border into Pakistan, prompting the country's National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) to add the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group to its list of terror organizations on July 25, 2024 ([Radio Mashaal](#), August 1, 2024).

Bahadur's Affiliations

Bahadur and his group have maintained contacts with other terror groups, such as al-Qaeda, the Haqqani Network, and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), despite maintaining separate identities. Bahadur himself was a crucial middleman in the region's militant landscape. Upon the formation of the TTP in December 2007, Bahadur was announced as its senior *naib* (deputy) emir ([GlobalSecurity.org](#)). Bahadur has also maintained a close alliance with Sirajuddin Haqqani, providing him with sanctuary in North Waziristan. Likewise, Bahadur has ties with Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazl (JUI-F), one of the major Islamist political parties of Pakistan ([Afghan Bios](#), March 21,

2024). Before 2014, Bahadur also founded a militant group called Shura Mujahideen-e-Waziristan ([The Friday Times](#) [Pakistan], December 13, 2023). Several jihadist commanders also pledged allegiance to or become affiliates of Bahadur's group, including Akhtar Muhammad Khalil, commander of Majlis-e-Askari ([X/@zarrar_11PK](#), April 1, 2024); Ali Dawar, commander of Jaish-e-Omari, Khalid Waziristani; commander of Jaish Fursan Muhammad; and Amir Sufiyan, who leads the Sufiyan Karwan ([The Khorasan Diary](#), March 24, 2024).

Bahadur's Background

Bahadur hails from near the Afghan border, specifically the Madda Khel tribal area in the North Waziristan District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province in northwest Pakistan ([Afghan Bios](#), March 21, 2024). He received his religious education from Madrasa Darul Uloom Nizamiya Eidak, which is located in the Mir Ali area of the North Waziristan District. After this, he became the finance secretary of the JUI-F students' organization and later its press secretary ([Voice of America Urdu](#), December 2, 2023).

Bahadur also belongs to the Uthmanzai Wazir tribe of North Waziristan and is a descendant of the Faqir of Ipi (Mirza Ali Khan). Khan is a legendary figure known for his resistance against British occupation in the 1930s and 1940s (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), April 10, 2009; [The Express Tribune](#) [Pakistan], August 22, 2011).

Bahadur After 9/11

Bahadur established closer ideological ties with the Afghan Taliban after 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror in Afghanistan. Despite positive relations with militants of the Haqqani Network and al-Qaeda, Bahadur did not align with them against the Pakistani government when cells of those groups crept into the Waziristan area of Pakistan. This was presumably due to a peace deal previously signed between his forces and the Pakistani government in

2007 ([The Express Tribune](#) [Pakistan], August 22, 2011).

Bahadur's close relationship with these groups was evidenced by his extending both shelter and support to members of the Haqqani Network and Arab members of al-Qaeda after 9/11 ([The Friday Times](#) [Pakistan], December 13, 2023). This enabled the rise of the "Tora Shpa," or the "Black Night Death Squad," a Taliban sub-unit which terrorized local villages ([Reuters](#), August 29, 2013; [The News International](#) [Pakistan], May 29, 2017). In 2009, a short-lived alliance was formed under the banner of "Shura Ittehad-i-Mujahideen," which included al-Qaeda, Baitullah Mehsud's large TTP chapter, Mullah Maulvi Nazir's smaller faction, and Bahadur's group. This shura council pledged loyalty to the head of the Afghan Taliban, Supreme Leader Mullah Omar, and promised to focus on attacking American troops in Afghanistan rather than the Pakistani military ([Center for American Progress](#), July 22, 2009). However, disagreements eventually led to Bahadur and Mullah Nazir's departure from the alliance.

Bahadur's Realignment Toward the TTP

Bahadur's militants fled to Khost in Afghanistan after Pakistani security forces launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan in 2014. Zarb-e-Azb targeted all jihadist groups equally, including Bahadur's group. Before this, Bahadur had even been regarded at times as an ally of the Pakistan Army, and was often referred to as the "good Taliban" ([The Friday Times](#) [Pakistan], July 13, 2023). Once in Afghanistan, Bahadur's ties with the TTP and al-Qaeda strengthened ([Voice of America Urdu](#), December 2, 2023).

These ties became more important following the withdrawal of U.S. forces in August 2021. Following this, Bahadur was better able to obtain "safe havens in Afghanistan, additional manpower, financial resources, and even advanced

weaponry left behind by U.S. forces" with the help of Haqqani Network ([Dawn](#), March 21, 2024). This expanding set of capabilities has resulted in an increase in the number of operations since 2021, including suicide bombings carried out against Pakistani security forces, for which Bahadur's group has claimed responsibility ([Strafasia](#), September 10, 2024).

Most recently, Bahadur's group is believed to have carried out several high-profile attacks on Pakistani security forces independently from the TTP. Bahadur's group used a number of different names in these attacks, including Da Ghazyano Karwan, Da Sufiyano Karawan, Jaish Fursan Muhammad, Jabhat Ansar al-Mahdi Khorasan, Ittehad Mujahideen Khorasan, Majlis-e-Askari, Jaish-e-Omari, and Jabhat al-Junood al-Mahdi ([Dawn](#), March 21, 2024; [The Khorasan Diary](#), March 24, 2024). The attacks themselves include the November 26, 2023 suicide bombing in Baka Khel area of Bannu District, the March 16, 2024 suicide bombing in North Waziristan District, and the August 31, 2024 suicide attack on a military convoy in Bannu's Jani Khel area ([Dawn](#), March 21, 2024). After the November 2023 Baka Khel attack, Pakistan urged Afghanistan to hand over Bahadur, who, according to Pakistani authorities, is residing in the southern part of Afghanistan ([The Khorasan Diary](#), March 24, 2024). The failure to do so finally prompted the NACTA to declare Bahadur's group a terrorist organization, as previously mentioned ([Radio Mashaal](#), August 1, 2024).

Conclusion

Famous as a skilled strategist, Bahadur delicately balanced the objectives and sensitivities of the Haqqani Network, Pakistani security forces, the TTP, and al-Qaeda. His membership in the Waziri tribe, whose lands straddle the Durand Line, further enabled him to mobilize militants on each side of the border ([The Friday Times](#) [Pakistan], December 13, 2023). Bahadur's combination of political shrewdness and charisma, combined with

his weaponization of cross-border Pashtun ties, provided him a strong foundation for acquiring power and launching attacks in Pakistan.

In recent years, Bahadur has been expanding his number of local affiliates. In October 2023, Commander Ismail Shaheen, head of the Asmatullah Shaheen Bhattani group, swore loyalty to him ([The Khorasan Diary](#), March 24, 2024). More recently, a group from the Khyber tribal district headed by Tariq Afridi pledged allegiance to Bahadur on February 20, 2024. On March 8, 2024, several commanders from the Jani Khel, Shewa, Mamand Khel, Aba Khel, Mada Khel, and Razmak areas of North Waziristan also pledged loyalty to him ([The Khorasan Diary](#), March 24, 2024).

The ongoing merger of these factions and the attacks orchestrated by the Hafiz Bahadur group will have serious consequences for peace and stability in the tribal areas. The presence of the Taliban government in Afghanistan is also working as a catalyst for militant organizations operating in majority Pashtun areas, which have trained their sights on the Pakistani government and local security forces. Bahadur is but one militant leader at the forefront of this new trend—and one to be especially watchful of, given his seniority and the respect accorded to him for his competence among other Pakistani jihadists.

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Shamin Mahfuz: A Retrospective of Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya Incarcerated Founder in Bangladesh

Iftekhharul Bashar

Executive Summary

- Md Shamin Mahfuz, the founder of Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya (JAFHS), a prominent jihadist group in Bangladesh loyal to al-Qaeda, was arrested in June 2023. Despite the successful arrest of many JAFHS leaders and militants, the group remains a threat, especially given Bangladesh's recent political instability.
- Mahfuz was an effective organizer, fundraiser, and trainer whose personal friendship with Nathan Bawm's Kuki-Chin National Front enabled him to set up training camps in Bangladesh's rugged Chittagong Hill Tracts.
- Mahfuz, who referred to himself as the "Osama bin Laden of Bengal," was a brilliant student who was radicalized through a family connection to Ansar al-Islam Bangladesh/the Ansarullah Bangla Team.

Md Shamin Mahfuz, also known by aliases Shamim Mahfuz, Sir, Shumon, Arif, Aslam, Abu Bakar, Menring, and Mending Murang, is the founder of Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya (JAFHS), a prominent jihadist group in Bangladesh loyal to al-Qaeda. He served as the group's chief coordinator until his arrest in June 2023. This included securing heavy weapons and setting up training camps in the remote and rugged terrain of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of southeastern Bangladesh

([bdnews24.com](https://www.bdnews24.com), June 23, 2023). [1] Mahfuz also forged alliances with ethno-nationalist armed groups like the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF). [2] Under his leadership, JAFHS planned significant attacks in Bangladesh in 2024 but failed to execute them. Despite the arrest of Mahfuz—who once called himself the “Osama bin Laden of Bengal”—and the subsequent ban on the group in August 2023, JAFHS remains a serious security threat in the country ([Dhaka Tribune](https://www.dhakatribune.com), August 10, 2023).

Background and Ideological Evolution

Mahfuz was born on July 21, 1976 in the predominantly agricultural district of Gaibandha in northern Bangladesh. His father was reportedly the president of the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party's farmers' branch in a sub-district of Gaibandha ([Kalbela](https://www.kalbela.com), June 25, 2023). Mahfuz was a top student at Rangpur Cadet College, where his radicalization is believed to have begun. [3] Mahfuz's affiliation with Islami Chhatra Shibir, the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, led to his expulsion from the school in 1993. Following this, Mahfuz was admitted into Daokandi College, where he completed his secondary education. Despite setbacks, Mahfuz excelled academically and ranked in the top 10 of his school's class in that year's nation-wide final examination ([bdnews24.com](https://www.bdnews24.com), June 23, 2023; [Prothom Alo](https://www.prothomalo.com), June 24, 2023).

Mahfuz later enrolled at Dhaka University, where he completed his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Sociology in 1997 and 1998, respectively ([Dhaka Tribune](https://www.dhakatribune.com), June 24, 2023). At Dhaka University, Mahfuz befriended fellow student Natham Bawm, who would go on to found the KNF ([bdnews24.com](https://www.bdnews24.com), June 23, 2023; for more on Bawm, see [Militant Leadership Monitor](https://www.militantleadershipmonitor.com), September 20, 2024).

Throughout this period, Mahfuz was further radicalized by familial ties. At Dhaka University, Mahfuz was linked by his nephew with Jamaatul Muslemin, one of Bangladesh's earliest pro-al-Qaeda militant

groups and the precursor to Ansar al-Islam Bangladesh/the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) ([Jagonews24.com](https://www.jagonews24.com), July 10, 2023; [Dhaka Tribune](https://www.dhakatribune.com), June 24, 2023; for more on Ansar al-Islam Bangladesh/the Ansarullah Bangla Team, see [Terrorism Monitor](https://www.terrorismmonitor.com), August 7, 2015, February 25, 2022).

Several members of Mahfuz' family stated that after completing his postgraduate studies at Dhaka University, Mahfuz used to frequent a now-closed organization that acted as a hub for militants named the Research Centre for Unity Development (RCUD), which was located in the upscale Dhanmondi neighborhood in Dhaka ([Prothom Alo](https://www.prothomalo.com), February 1, 2018). [4]

From University to JMB and Ansar al-Islam

After completing his graduate degree, Mahfuz began pursuing a PhD at Jahangirnagar University. Mahfuz's studies focused on ethnic groups in the CHT in far southeastern Bangladesh—particularly in the area of Naikhongchhari, where he bought land for lemon farming ([bdnews24.com](https://www.bdnews24.com), June 23, 2023). According to the chief of Bangladesh's Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime unit (CTTC), Mahfuz “willingly picked the subject so that he could travel to [the CHT] and build a [safehaven] there” ([Dhaka Tribune](https://www.dhakatribune.com), June 24, 2023). Mahfuz was known as a skilled academic proficient in Bengali, English, and Kuki.

Mahfuz is believed to have worked at the Bangladesh Rifles College as a lecturer from 2001 to 2002 and Bangladesh Open University from 2003 to 2011. Officials claim that Mahfuz has been associated with militant groups broadly since 2006, spending time with Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) before joining Ansar al-Islam ([The Daily Star](https://www.thedailystar.com) [Bangladesh], October 28, 2022). Police involved with Mahfuz's investigation have evidence that he was in close contact with Maulana Osman Ghani, also known as Abu Imran, the leader of Ansar al-Islam ([Bangla Tribune](https://www.banglatribune.com), July 4, 2023).

In 2007, Mahfuz associated with Ansar al-Islam's spiritual leader, Muhammad Jasimuddin Rahmani, in addition to other Ansar al-Islam (AAI) leaders. During this period, he maintained extensive communications with domestic and foreign militant leaders. This included Pakistani citizen Ejaz Ahmed Kargil, a senior al-Qaeda operative residing in Bangladesh who moved there after marrying Bangladeshi citizen, Naznin Sultana. Kargil was subsequently killed in Pakistan in 2015. Known for his association with al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, Kargil oversaw militant activities in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan ([Dhaka Times](#), June 24, 2023). Mahfuz eventually married Kargil's ex-wife Naznin Sultana, whom he had met at RCUD. She later became involved in the JAFHS's women *da'wah* (preaching) wing ([Dhaka Times](#), June 24, 2023).

Formation of JAFHS in Prison

In 2011, Mahfuz was arrested in Bandarban District for alleged extremist activities. During his time in jail, Mahfuz was found with jihadist materials. Following his release in 2012, Mahfuz moved to Dhaka and later the Chakaria neighborhood in Cox's Bazar District from 2013 to 2014, where he resumed his militancy. Rearrested in 2014, Mahfuz was sent to Kashimpur Central Jail, where he connected with leaders of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups like JMB and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh (HUJI-B) ([The Daily Star](#), October 28, 2022).

At that time, Mainul Islam (alias Roxy), who later became JAFHS's first emir, was also in prison ([Kalbela](#), June 25, 2023). Upon release from Kashimpur Central Jail in 2017, Mahfuz and Roxy formed a new militant group, which at the time operated without a name. Immediately afterwards, Mahfuz began recruiting members and establishing training camps. Roxy led the group until his 2021 arrest, after which Mahfuz appointed Anisur Rahman Mahmud (aliases Tamal and Shawkat) as leader around mid-2020 in addition to forming a "shura committee" ([Dhaka Tribune](#), June

24, 2023). The group was named Jama'atul Ansar fil Hind al Sharqiya (JAFHS) (meaning Group of Supporters [of Islam] in the Eastern Indian Subcontinent) in 2022 ([DMP News](#), February 22, 2023). Abdullah Maimun, who became the head of the *da'wah* wing, proposed the name and a vision of expanding the group's operations beyond Bangladesh.

Before Anisur Rahman Mahmud was re-arrested in 2023, Mahfuz had resided in the Naikhongchhari sub-district of Bandarban District in the CHT from 2019 to 2021. Mahfuz also spent time in Dhaka's Demra neighborhood in 2020. Mahfuz, as chief coordinator of the group, aimed to train Bangladeshi youths for militant attacks and armed conflict against law enforcement in order to establish Islamic rule in the country ([Jagonews24.com](#), July 10, 2023). The youths monitored mosques to recruit and radicalize members and received military training as well as skills in trades to become electricians, carpenters, and mobile phone mechanics. Surgeons were particularly sought after as recruits, according to seized documents. The organization relocated nearly 100 members to the CHT to prepare them for "Ghazwatul Hind," a mythologized, supposedly imminent religious conflict in South Asia that they imagined would mirror the famous Battle of Badr in Islamic history ([The Daily Star](#), January 31, 2023; [Desh Rupantor](#), May 15, 2024). Additionally, JAFHS planned to enlist modern technology experts who had earlier joined Islamic State Bengal (ISB), known locally as Neo-Jama'at Mujahideen Bangladesh (Neo-JMB)—a group which has all but ceased to exist due to the arrest of most of its leaders ([The Daily Star](#), May 10, 2023).

Mahfuz played a crucial role in funding the group's operations, in addition to bomb-making and training new recruits how to use firearms ([bdnews24.com](#), October 10, 2022). Under his leadership, the organization garnered most of its financial support through ostensibly benign religious projects which operated as fronts. This allowed them to promote activities like

mosque construction and Islamic outreach, while avoiding overt references to militant operations that were also being funded. Frequently, members also self-financed their involvement through personal accounts or acquaintances (Jagonews24.com, July 10, 2023). JAFHS further received millions of taka (tens of thousands of dollars) from domestic and foreign donors via mobile banking and suspected illegal channels like *hundi*, a traditional, informal remittance system ([The Daily Star](http://TheDailyStar.com), November 10, 2022).

KNF Alliance and Capture

Mahfuz brokered a deal for JAFHS to use training camps run by the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF), a mainly Christian tribal insurgent group in the CHT ([Voice of America](http://VoiceofAmerica.com), June 24, 2023). As previously mentioned, Mahfuz and KNF leader Nathan Bawm were close friends at Dhaka University. Thus, Mahfuz joined Bawm in the hills at several points in his life. In 2019, Mahfuz informed Bawm about his plan to launch the as-yet-unnamed militant group and asked that the latter help him set up training camps in the CHT ([Dhaka Tribune](http://DhakaTribune.com), June 24, 2023).

Negotiations between the two groups were held in Hotel Bay Wonders in the Kolatoli neighborhood of Cox's Bazar around April 2020. According to the deal, the KNF and JAFHS would not assist each other's enemies. JAFHS would also cover all expenses for KNF to attend training camps, and JAFHS would pay KNF trainers. [6] Bangladeshi police managed to recover two pages of the negotiations from Mahfuz, which detailed how the KNF would assist JAFHS ([Dhaka Tribune](http://DhakaTribune.com), June 24, 2023).

In October 2022, a raid by the country's Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) on KNF and JAFHS camps near the Indian border disrupted the groups' activities and led to the arrest of dozens of militants. This prompted hundreds of villagers to flee to Mizoram State in India. Mahfuz and his wife, Naznin Sultana, were later arrested in June 2023 in the neighborhood of Demra

(on the outskirts of Dhaka) with a cache of arms and explosives (bdnews24.com, June 23, 2023). Mahfuz's communications devices linked him to local and foreign militant leaders and contained instructional videos on how to make bombs and suicide vests. According to information revealed by Mahfuz during his interrogation, JAFHS planned targeted killings of secular thinkers, police, judges, atheist writers, bloggers, TV anchors, members of the media, theatre workers, and LGBT activists.

In the interrogation, Mahfuz also admitted that his group was ideologically aligned with al-Qaeda, which he hoped JAFHS would become an affiliate of. Mahfuz was known to intentionally mirror Osama bin Laden's walking style and mannerisms as he moved through the mountainous terrain of his militant camp. Upon his arrest and questioning by the CTTC, Mahfuz proclaimed, "I am al-Qaeda. I am the Osama bin Laden of Bengal" ([Bangla Tribune](http://BanglaTribune.com), July 4, 2023). Every month, Mahfuz received 20,000 taka (\$200) from AAI's central fund. Further, Mahfuz stated that he was in contact with Sheikh Tamim al-Adnani in the Ummah Network, an online jihadist social media platform—and one of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent's main outlets for Bengali-language propaganda. Mahfuz drafted and sent scripts to al-Adnani, demonstrating that he actively wished to be involved in the wider al-Qaeda propaganda ecosystem ([Bangla Tribune](http://BanglaTribune.com), July 4, 2023).

Conclusion

Mahfuz's journey from an Islamist youth activist and brilliant student to a jihadist organizer highlights an unusual path to radicalization, driven largely by his family and associates. Recruited by his nephew, Mahfuz's case underscores how local or familial interactions fuel national, regional, and global networks. It exposes weaknesses in Bangladesh's prison system and the inadequacies in monitoring and rehabilitating high-profile militants after their release. Despite law enforcement

efforts that have succeeded in arresting nearly 70 key leaders and members of JAFHS, the group remains a persistent threat. The country's recent political revolution compounds with the general issues posed by frequent jailbreaks and weakened policing and counterterrorism capabilities to create an environment conducive for militants like Mahfuz to regroup and reorganize.

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Notes:

[1] The CHT in southeastern Bangladesh covers 13,295 square kilometers (5,100 square miles) and was divided into Khagrachhari, Rangamati, and Bandarban districts in 1984. This area was historically settled by tribal refugees and ethnic minorities from Myanmar and is the only major region of hills in Bangladesh. The CHT borders India and Myanmar and is approximately one-tenth of Bangladesh's total area. The CHT was host to an insurgency for more than two decades (1972–1997) led by the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) and its armed wing, the Shanti Bahini.

[2] The KNF, also known as the Bawm Party, is an ethno-nationalist armed militant political organization in the CHT.

[3] A cadet college is a special military high school system in Bangladesh.

[4] Jamaatul Muslemin is the parent organization of Ansar al-Islam Bangladesh, which now refers to itself as the Ansarullah Bangla Team. Jamaatul Muslemin formerly followed the Yemeni al-Qaeda leader Anwar al-Awlaki. This organization targeted students of English-language schools and public and private universities for recruitment. The group also included poor students of madrasas up in the country's northern regions. Jamaatul Muslemin was heavily associated with the Research Centre for Unity Development (RCUD) in Dhanmondi neighborhood, Dhaka.

[5] The group had additional plans to create a naval unit in Patuakhali District (Barisal Division, in the South-Central Region) for its members who possessed military training. This division was designed to serve as a refuge in times of heightened law enforcement operations ([Dhaka Tribune](#), August 3, 2023).

[6] Based on a document reviewed by the author.

Mohammad Bazzi, Talal Chahine, and Nazem Ahmad: Hezbollah's Three Global Financiers in Focus

Adam Rouselle

Executive Summary

- Investigations of Hezbollah's financing network over the last several years have identified three major funders of the terror group: Mohammad Bazzi, Talal Chahine, and Nazem Ahmad. The arrest of the former two and the destruction of the third's network is expected to significantly constrain Hezbollah's ability to fund its reconstitution, following Israel's offensive against the group.
- Mohammad Ibrahim Bazzi leveraged his close ties with former Gambian President Yahya Jammeh and his role as an "honorary consul" for The Gambia in Lebanon in order to launder more than \$100 million into Hezbollah's coffers. Allegations include Bazzi playing a role as intermediary for Jammeh with Lebanese-Colombian narcotics kingpin Ayman Jouma.

Executive Summary (ctnd.)

- Talal Chahine managed to use his ownership of a Detroit-area chain of Middle Eastern restaurants called La Shish to move nearly \$20 million into Hezbollah's accounts. His importance in funding the group is indicated by the fact that Chahine keynoted a Hezbollah fundraiser in 2002 alongside then-Hezbollah leader Sheikh Muhammad Fadlallah.
- Nazem Said Ahmad, who is believed to reside in Lebanon, directed a global network that took advantage of the permissive nature of the global diamond, precious gems, and art market to funnel at least \$160 million into Hezbollah. A 2019 U.S. investigation succeeded in catching more than 50 members of his network, and the 2023 arrest of his alleged accountant is expected to lead to further developments.

The death of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah on September 27, 2024 marked a turning point for the group ([Al Jazeera](#), September 28). The event came amid a barrage of increasingly devastating attacks from Israel, ranging from exploding pagers to the targeted killings of other top leaders, such as Fuad Shukr and Ibrahim Aqil ([Jerusalem Post](#), September 20, 2024; [Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), November 26, 2024). These deaths and the destruction of major organizational strongholds have significantly constrained Hezbollah's capacity for future operations. Israel's offensive did not occur in a vacuum, with law enforcement entities in the United States and elsewhere playing an essential

role in targeting Hezbollah's vast illicit financial infrastructure in the years leading up to the conflict.

In 2023, international law enforcement officials arrested multiple key figures in connection to their alleged dealings with Hezbollah. The individuals revolved around three alleged conspirators: Mohammad Ibrahim Bazzi (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), January 5, 2024), Talal Chahine, and Nazem Said Ahmad. Collectively, the three seemingly committed vast and sophisticated international financial crimes for the benefit of Hezbollah using legitimate global financial channels. With investigations still ongoing and multiple arrests having already been made, further revelations about Hezbollah's vast criminal financial enterprise will likely emerge in the future. This could lead to further arrests that will severely constrain the organization's ability to rebuild.

Mohammad Bazzi and Talal Chahine: Co-Conspirators With Decades of International Criminal Dealings

Authorities arrested Lebanese-Belgian national Mohammad Ibrahim Bazzi, 59, and Lebanese national Talal Chahine, 78, at Henri Coandă International Airport in Bucharest, Romania, on February 24, 2023. The two were accused of conspiring to force or induce an individual in the United States to liquidate some of their Michigan-based real estate assets to covertly transfer hundreds of thousands of dollars in proceeds to bank accounts they controlled in Lebanon ([Al Arabiya Network](#), February 25, 2023). The two suspects had been secretly recorded discussing methods to conceal their dealings from law enforcement officials and the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), including through a proposed fictitious purchase of restaurant equipment from a third party in China, which was to be later transferred to another party in Lebanon ([Asharq Al-Aswat](#), February 26, 2023). In other instances, the two discussed fabricating fictitious loans to members of Chahine's family in Kuwait, faking a real estate deal

in Beirut, and falsifying a franchise agreement for a Lebanese restaurant to open locations in the United States for the purposes of illegally transferring assets outside the country ([Times of Israel](#), April 26, 2023).

Talal Chahine

Talal Chahine has a lengthy history of providing funds to Hezbollah through his involvement in the food and beverage business. In the 1990s and 2000s, he and his then-wife, Elfat El Aouar, owned and operated a Detroit-area chain of Middle Eastern restaurants called La Shish. Between 2000 and 2006, the two used the business to hide an estimated \$20 million from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), much of which ultimately ended up in the coffers of Hezbollah. The duo also traveled to Lebanon to attend a Hezbollah fundraiser in 2002—Chahine was a keynote speaker alongside then-Hezbollah leader Sheikh Muhammad Fadlallah ([Crime Library](#), December 26, 2023).

In 2006, Chahine fled from the United States to Lebanon with his second wife, who was also a Lebanese national. Chahine left behind El Aouar and their three children. In 2007, El Aouar was convicted of tax evasion charges in connection with her role as Vice President of Finance for La Shish and later found guilty of naturalization fraud charges, resulting in her being stripped of her U.S. citizenship ([U.S. Department of State](#), February 26, 2008). Chahine, meanwhile, remained a fugitive in Lebanon until his 2023 arrest and extradition. In a 2013 interview, he claimed he wished to return to the United States ([Deadline Detroit](#), February 11, 2013).

Mohammad Ibrahim Bazzi

Bazzi was born on August 10, 1964 in Bent Jbeil, which has long been a Hezbollah stronghold in southern Lebanon. He is listed as owning or controlling multiple entities sanctioned by OFAC that were allegedly used to funnel money to

Hezbollah, including Global Trading Group NV, Euro African Group LTD, Africa Middle East Investment Holding SAL, Premier Investment Group SAL, and Car Escort Services SAL ([U.S. Department of State's Rewards for Justice Program](#), December 20, 2023). Bazzi was named in an investigation as one of 500 "shadow" diplomats involved in widespread abuses globally. As a so-called "honorary consul" for The Gambia in Lebanon, he is believed to have brought more than \$100 million into Hezbollah's coffers ([Jerusalem Post](#), November 15, 2022).

The conversations between Bazzi and Chahine that led to their 2023 arrest offer only a glimpse into Bazzi's vast international criminal dealings. In The Gambia, Bazzi leveraged his diplomatic status to become the most influential businessman in the inner circle of former President Yahya Jammeh, who "ran the country like an organized crime syndicate" and had "every big deal" connected to Bazzi ([The African Criminology Journal](#), April 1, 2019). Bazzi was reportedly the most significant minor shareholder in The Gambia's Prime Bank, which was an alleged "critical money laundering instrument" for Hezbollah in West Africa. Prime Bank was once a subsidiary of the now-defunct Lebanese Canadian Bank, "the infamous money laundering machine of Lebanon" ([Jerusalem Post](#), February 27).

U.S. officials claim that President Jammeh awarded Bazzi a monopoly on oil import contracts in exchange for supplying the regime with illicit goods and services. Bazzi reportedly used his firms in Europe, Africa, and Lebanon to sell oil sourced from French energy giant Total to the regime at prices he controlled before transferring most of the proceeds to Hezbollah. This revelation resulted in the sanctioning of Bazzi's aforementioned companies in 2018 ([Wall Street Journal](#), May 17, 2018). A 2018 press release by the U.S. Treasury Department also claimed that Bazzi had business dealings with infamous Lebanese-Colombian narcotics kingpin Ayman Jouma. Similarly, Bazzi was alleged to have

acted as an intermediary between Jouma and the Jammeh administration to leverage The Gambia's potential as a trans-Atlantic narcotics trafficking hub ([U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), May 17, 2018).

Nazem Ahmad: A Criminal Conspiracy in High Society

Nazem Said Ahmad, a Lebanese and Belgian national, was born to Lebanese parents in Sierra Leone in 1965. A notable figure in the international art community, he reportedly owns galleries in Beirut and London and has worked with multiple U.K.-based artists, art galleries, and auction houses. His vast collection contains masterpieces from Pablo Picasso and Andy Warhol ([The Guardian](#), April 18, 2023).

In 2019, U.S. authorities sanctioned Ahmad over allegedly providing material support to Hezbollah ([Reuters](#), April 19, 2023). U.S. officials further allege that Ahmad's vast fortune stems from his involvement in the illegal trade of "conflict diamonds." As a result, the U.S. government introduced sanctions on a network of 52 individuals and entities in Lebanon, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and Hong Kong with reported links to Ahmad ([Naharnet](#), April 18, 2023; [U.S. Department of State's Rewards for Justice Program](#), December 26, 2023). Hezbollah has allegedly benefited significantly from the illegal diamond trade in recent decades due to its ability to infiltrate illegal smuggling networks operated by Lebanese diaspora communities in West and Central Africa ([Times of Israel](#), February 26, 2013).

U.S. authorities claim Ahmad directs a "global network of family members, associates, and companies that take advantage of the permissive nature of the global diamond, precious gems, and art market" while evading U.S. and international financial safeguards. They also accuse his alleged network of using various means to force participants to falsify certificates required by the Kimberley Process—set up in 2003 to

prevent the trade of "blood diamonds"—in order to legitimately sell conflict diamonds internationally. The proceeds from these diamond sales have enabled Ahmad to purchase vast quantities of artwork and luxury goods that have been shipped to Lebanon using falsified, undervalued invoices. Hezbollah's influence at major Lebanese ports enables said falsification of documents. These goods are then resold for substantial profits around the world, which are then used to fund Hezbollah ([U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), April 18, 2023).

U.S. prosecutors claim that Ahmad and his network conducted an estimated \$160 million in transactions through the U.S. financial system alone ([Asharq Al-Aswat](#), April 20, 2023). The loosely regulated international art trade has long been a noted factor of global financial crime and is used to launder money and avoid sanctions. This is due to a lack of requirements for financial reporting in the art trade—something demanded for virtually every other transaction of high-value, highly liquid goods. A 2020 U.S. Senate report, for example, found the art business to be the largest legal but unregulated industry in the country ([CNN](#), July 29, 2020).

Although Ahmad has thus far managed to evade U.S. authorities, his alleged accountant, Sundar Nagarajan, was arrested in London on April 18, 2024 and extradited to the United States on December 19, 2024. The U.S. Treasury Department alleges that the Indian national was the central manager of the financial ledgers, which detailed the operations of Ahmad's global network. Likewise, Ahmad is believed to have facilitated the payment and transportation of art purchased by members of Ahmad's network from major U.K. galleries and auction houses ([The National](#) [United Arab Emirates], December 20, 2023). The U.K. government also announced that it had frozen all assets belonging to Ahmad on the day of Nagarajan's arrest ([His Majesty's Treasury](#) [U.K.], April 18, 2023). Though it

has not yet occurred, Nagarajan is expected to provide further information on Ahmad's vast alleged criminal conspiracy and ties to Hezbollah.

Conclusion

Although Israel has dealt a significant blow to Hezbollah's military capability in Lebanon, the recent and ongoing efforts of U.S. law enforcement to clamp down on the organization's financial networks will likely further constrain the group's capacity to rebuild. The arrests of 2023 reveal Hezbollah's ability to benefit from major international criminal trafficking, smuggling, and laundering operations. The sophistication of these operations and the financiers' talent and personal wealth demonstrate the group's ability to infiltrate and co-opt participants in illicit trade networks, even at substantial risk to their lives and livelihoods. With more details likely to be revealed, the international community will likely gain a clearer image of Hezbollah's vast financial enterprise. These revelations will no doubt provide further insight into how other sanctioned entities or even states employ sophisticated means to fund their operations, which may prove valuable information for those who wish to counter these activities moving forward.

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