



# MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

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### **Bello Turji: Nigeria's Notorious Bandit Still Violent, Unaligned**

*Jacob Zenn*

#### **Executive Summary**

- On June 24, Nigerian militant Bello Turji Kachalla and his men staged a large ambush on security forces, killing up to 44 people. During his decade-long time as a bandit in northwestern Nigeria, it was frequently feared that Turji could join forces with local jihadist forces to oppose the government, though this continues to be unlikely.
- While Turji purports himself to be motivated by a desire to protect his fellow Fulani herders against their more agricultural Hausa neighbors, it is more likely that he and his men are motivated by vengeance and greed as opposed to any sort of ideology.

On June 24, Nigerian militant Bello Turji Kachalla (generally referred to as Bello Turji) and his men staged a large ambush on security forces, allegedly killing 44 near the Shinkafi Local Government Area in Zamfara State ([Daily Post](#) [Nigeria], June 24; [Zagazola](#), June 25). While there is some doubt over whether said number has been inflated, Bello Turji's ambush comes amid a renewed Nigerian offensive since early 2025 to capture the infamous bandit and bring him to justice. Bello Turji is frequently considered to be a strategically important figure in northwestern Nigeria—a dangerous foe should he ever side with local jihadist groups or a powerful, if untrustworthy ally if he ever sided with the government—but his continued refusal to take a side in Abuja's fight against Islamism over the last three years and the waning strength of his forces suggests that Turji's importance should not be overstated in the current fight.

On June 12, al-Qaeda-affiliated Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) attacked Basso, Benin, 15 kilometers from Benin's border post with Nigeria. This represents JNIM's closest attack yet to Nigerian territory ([Premium Times](#)

[Nigeria], June 13). While some worry that Turji could ally with JNIM and help the group penetrate Nigeria, there is little reason to be concerned about such an alliance. Turji remains only pseudo-ideological, and his organization, while still active, is in decline. These facts make him a relative nonfactor in JNIM's advances toward Nigeria's northwestern states.

Turji has spent 2025 on the run from security forces, leading his still-nameless group of several hundred men. Turji's forces have been implicated in the extortion, rape, and murder of locals in Nigeria's rural northwestern Sokoto and Zamfara states. Typically, Bello Turji's fighters demand up to 50 million naira (approx. \$25,000) in "protection fees" in exchange for allowing farmers to return to normal life. If this fee is not paid, his fighters may kill the farmers and their families ([Access Post](#) [Nigeria], June 11). Turji's motivations seem to be in no small part ethnic, citing the ongoing conflict between farmers and his own Fulani herders—but there also appears a general profit and vigilante motive, hence his frequent branding as "bandit" rather than "ethnoterrorist."

This year's Nigerian campaign against him has seen mixed success. The Nigerian Army claimed early victories, killing Turji's son and dozens of militants on January 17 and killing an important lieutenant around May 19 ([Punch](#) [Nigeria], January 22; [YouTube/WION](#), May 19). Turji's men have remained lethal even under pressure. On April 2, for example, his group killed 11 farmers in Sokoto, with the survivors blaming the Nigerian security forces for not stopping Turji ([Daily Trust](#) [Nigeria], April 3; [Nigerian Tribune](#), April 3). In May, Turji's men forcibly evicted thousands in Sokoto State amid threats of violence ([Punch Magazine](#) [Nigeria], May 13).

In the past, Turji has lamented the lives "wasted" as a result of his conflict with the Nigerian forces, claiming to seek peace for the Fulani and Hausa peoples of his native Zamfara State and the surrounding regions

([Daily Trust](#) [Nigeria], March 6, 2022). He further claims the mantle of protecting Fulanis against Hausa farmers, his primary victims. While some sources characterize him as a clearly ideological Fulani militant, he is generally understood to be motivated "more by vengeance and grievances than a cogent ideology" (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), November 1, 2021; [allAfrica](#), June 20, 2024).

As Turji's grievances are ethnic and he fights primarily with another Muslim ethnic group, it seems reasonable that he would not be attracted to jihadist messaging. Regional Islamists preach Islamic unity, which would prevent or restrict Turji from vigilantism and banditry of his coreligionists. Likewise, Turji would endanger himself and his men by fighting alongside JNIM, as this would mean remaining in close proximity to some of his former Hausa victims, now armed and potentially looking to even the score. Although Ansaru, an al-Qaeda-affiliated group that operates in northern Nigeria also claims to defend Fulanis (against Christians, not jihadists), Bello Turji is adamant that his group "doesn't know them [Ansaru or Boko Haram, another Islamist group] and that 'we don't [even] know what [Boko Haram] means'" ([Sahara Reporters](#), May 6; [Daily Trust](#) [Nigeria], March 6, 2022). While Turji claims complete dissociation and feigns ignorance, it remains to be the case that Turji's group, while extremely violent, is not inspired by ideology, lowering the likelihood that they side with Islamists.

## Conclusion

All in all, Turji remains a major security threat, but not a likely jihadist proxy or partner. His enduring violence against local populations and Nigerian security forces does not negate the risk of jihadist infiltration of his group, but Turji himself would not be the bridge for such a change. While Turji has at times demonstrated softer and more conciliatory rhetoric, his group has remained highly militant, as evidenced by recent attacks, and he has

continued this violent streak for nearly a decade. While Turji's group will remain a significant human security threat in northwestern Nigeria, there are few signs the bandits will link up with JNIM or Ansaru. In fact, Turji's lack of any coherent ideology, much less a religious one, should be viewed as a symptom of lawlessness in Nigeria's northwest, rather than a catalyst for future jihadist gains.

*Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Militant Leadership Monitor.*

## **Mahikhan Baloch: Fourth Female Baloch Suicide Bomber Amid Factional Friction**

*Imtiaz Baloch*

### **Executive Summary**

- On March 3, the separatist Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) conducted its fourth attack using a female suicide bomber. This suggests that the trend is likely to continue, with the women acting as powerful symbols for the BLA in its claim to represent the whole of Baloch society.
- The most recent bombing was carried out more specifically by BLA Azad, a sub-faction in conflict with BLA Jeeyand for influence and resources. The former appears to be on the rise, while the latter is striving to maintain its power and influence within the organization.

Mahikhan Baloch's March 3 attack marked the fourth time Baloch separatists used a female suicide bomber. This once unheard-

of practice among Baloch separatists has become an increasingly common trend in the region's insurgency. The young woman from Gwadar targeted a Pakistani paramilitary Frontier Corps (FC) convoy, striking a vehicle in Kalat, Balochistan, in an attack which killed at least one person and injured three more ([Dawn](#), March 3; [The Express Tribune](#) [Pakistan], March 4). The continued employment of female suicide bombers represents a striking trend in global militancy, considering the comparative rarity of female suicide bombers in other conflicts.

The attack was claimed by the Baloch Liberation Army's (BLA) Azad faction, a lesser-known faction seeking relevance within an increasingly violent insurgency. Its competitor, BLA Jeeyand, is a splinter group that emerged following a rift in 2018. BLA Jeeyand has been implicated in major attacks, including suicide bombings against Pakistani security forces and Chinese nationals in Balochistan and Sindh provinces ([Deutsche Welle Urdu](#), March 4). More recently, BLA Jeeyand carried out the hijacking of the Jaffer Express on March 1, in which more than 400 people, most of whom were off-duty personnel of the Pakistani security forces, were taken hostage. During the rescue operation, 26 security personnel and 31 militants were killed, according to Pakistan's military media, with BLA Jeeyand only identifying 14 of these militants as its own fighters ([The Balochistan Post](#), March 19).

Mahikhan Baloch's attack marks a definitive attempt by BLA Azad to assert itself. Until this year, BLA Azad had primarily conducted occasional low-profile attacks. However, this attack indicates the group's intent to gain more attention amid growing violence in Balochistan in a likely attempt to outbid BLA Jeeyand for interest, support, and resources ([Voice of America Urdu](#), February 3).

### **Who Was Mahikhan Baloch?**

Mahikhan Baloch fits the profile of previous Baloch female suicide bombers, but her

lack of activism prior to joining the BLA's militant movement makes her case unusual. Mahikhan was a resident of Gwadar District in Balochistan, just as the third Baloch female suicide bomber, Mahal Baloch, had been. Mahal carried out her attack using a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) at the entry gate of the Bela FC headquarters in August 2024 ([The Balochistan Post](#), August 26, 2024).

Mahikhan Baloch, for her part, joined the BLA Azad's suicide squad, called the Majeed Brigade, in 2015. Like several other Baloch female suicide bombers (Shari Baloch, Summiya Qalandarani, and Mahal Baloch), she was college-educated, holding a Bachelor of Science degree. In addition to her academic background, she also held a keen interest in Balochi literature, traditions, and culture ([Humgaam News](#), April 26). Unlike past female bombers, she had not been involved in student activist organizations, nor had her family been politically active prior to the attack, making her subsequent decision to become a suicide bomber all the more surprising.

Female suicide bombers in Balochistan serve not only as combatants but also as potent symbols of the insurgency. Past female bombers allegedly sought to inspire other Baloch women to take part in the insurgency. While Baloch women have long existed in supporting roles around the BLA and other Baloch groups in Pakistan, their participation in full-scale militancy in the past few years is likely a deliberate trend ([New Lines Magazine](#), December 14, 2023).

Female bombers, in addition to their enhanced ability to bypass security measures, draw more attention to the Baloch cause than their male counterparts. The use of female suicide bombers also signals (perhaps as part of BLA messaging) that the anti-Pakistani BLA-led insurgency enjoys a wide base of support. More specifically, the BLA appears to be trying to push a narrative that even women not immediately exposed to militarism (as opposed to those with a prior history of

activism, or BLA-insurgency-connected family members) are committed to giving their lives in order to achieve the BLA's objectives of a free Balochistan. The presence of educated, middle-class women like Mahikhan Baloch participating in suicide attacks further evokes the idea that the appeal of suicide attacks and other lethal violence is becoming more attractive across classes, drawing in individuals engaged with cultural activism rather than purely the most marginalized and/or impoverished within Pakistan's Baloch minority.

### **Intra-BLA Rivalries**

The rivalry between BLA Azad and BLA Jeeyand reflects deeper ideological, strategic, and symbolic divides within the Baloch insurgency. BLA Azad has reasserted its influence in Balochistan's insurgency, highlighting the difference between its own ideology and that of BAL Jeeyand. BLA Azad focuses on achieving a "Greater Balochistan," which includes southeastern Iran and parts of Afghanistan. This shift was highlighted in Mahikhan Baloch's propaganda message released by the group after her suicide bombing. She outlined the group's cross-border intentions by detailing the economic, political, and religious oppression faced by the Baloch community under the Iranian clerical regime, which may gain increasing resonance if the Iranian regime falters under Israeli and U.S. military pressure ([Humgaam News](#), March 25).

Each faction presents its suicide bombers in distinct rhetorical and strategic frames. BLA Azad claims to be the legitimate faction and has accused the Bashir Zaib-led BLA Jeeyand group of being comprised of expelled members of the larger organization. Since then, BLA Azad and BLA Jeeyand have each leveled accusations at each other for trying to lead the Baloch national movement astray ([The Balochistan Post](#), December 23, 2017; [Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies](#), February 2). BLA Azad emphasizes

local identity and cultural resonance by using the term "*watan nadreeg*" to describe the suicide bombing, which signifies a selfless mission for the homeland and a more regional perspective. In contrast, despite the broader organization's purported secularism, BLA Jeeyand adopts the term *fidiyee* to describe suicide bombers, which aligns it more with jihadist rhetoric and may appeal to a different ideological base ([Humgaam News](#), March 3). Additionally, BLA Azad was cautious in releasing Mahikhan Baloch's name and publishing her picture. This was an attempt to sabotage any investigations into her accomplices and avoid losses to the Pakistani security forces. In contrast, BLA Jeeyand promptly releases the names and faces of their fighters to gain maximum media attention ([Humgaam News](#), March 5). It remains unconfirmed, but the Pakistani security may have still detained Mahikhan Baloch's relatives in Gwadar after her operation.

## Conclusion

The emergence of female suicide bombers like Mahikhan Baloch reflects both the deepening intensity of the Baloch insurgency and its internal rivalries. Competition between two of the BLA factions and their strategies to portray themselves as more legitimate than the other is likely to continue, with female operatives symbolically leading the way. As the BLA Jeeyand faction continues to carry out high-profile attacks to compete with the rise of BLA Azad, the latter is shifting from low-profile attacks to more impactful operations aimed at maximizing casualties, ensuring greater media visibility and engagement of fighters on the battlefield, making it easier to recruit and compete for limited resources from supportive members of the local population.

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## Shahid Umar: Senior-Most TTP Commander Killed in Afghanistan to Date in Apparent Assassination

*Abdul Sayed*

### Executive Summary

- On December 3, 2024, senior Pakistani Taliban (TTP) commander Shahid Umar was killed in Afghanistan, the most significant killing of a TTP commander under Afghan Taliban rule to date. The assassination was unusual in that Shahid Umar was killed in the home of a former Afghan Taliban official, allegedly with the support of Pakistan's security forces.
- Prior to his death, Shahid Umar held a number of positions within the TTP, ranging from shadow governor of Bajaur District to the head of the Northern Zone Military Commission.

On December 3, 2024, senior Pakistani Taliban (TTP) commander Maulvi Shahid Umar Bajauri (also known as Shahid Umar) was killed in Afghanistan, the most significant killing of a TTP commander under Afghan Taliban rule to date. Shahid Umar perished alongside several others in Kunar Province's Shegal District at the residence of Qari Khalid, a former district official for the Afghan Taliban ([Dawn](#), December 4, 2024). **[1]** Qari Khalid had invited Shahid Umar for lunch in the early afternoon, and Shahid Umar arrived there with his three companions: Khaksar, Adnan, and Tariq. Shortly after they began eating, an assassin targeted them with a silenced pistol, killing Shahid Umar,



Khaksar, and Adnan on the spot. Tariq was injured but managed to return fire and kill the attacker. [2] Following the incident, Afghan Taliban security forces and Shahid Umar's associates arrived and arrested Qari Khalid for his alleged role in the plot. He has since remained in Afghan Taliban custody.

This was an unusual incident considering it involved the death of a senior TTP leader under Afghan Taliban rule ([Dawn](#), December 4, 2024). No individual or organization claimed responsibility for Shahid Umar's killing. However, TTP-affiliated media outlets alleged that Pakistani security agencies orchestrated the assassination through their agents, namely Qari Khalid.

### **The Alleged Mastermind: Qari Khalid**

Qari Khalid is the central figure believed to be behind Shahid Umar's assassination. As previously mentioned, Qari Khalid was a former local Afghan Taliban official and was arrested by Afghan Taliban authorities shortly after the incident. [3] Qari Khalid hails from the Shegal District of Afghanistan's Kunar Province and served as a local commander for the Afghan Taliban in Kunar during the insurgency against U.S. and coalition forces. [4] After the Afghan Taliban's return to power in August 2021, he held various district-level positions but had been dismissed from his duties some time ago. [5] There is no confirmed information about the identity of the assassin present in his house. According to sources citing Shahid Umar's injured security guard Tariq, however, the attacker had been among the guests at Qari Khalid's home. [6] During the meal, the attacker left the room briefly and, moments later, returned to kill Shahid Umar and his compatriots from the doorway as they were eating.

Hundreds attended the funeral of Shahid Umar and his associates, which was held in a border village near Shegal. [7] The following night, unidentified attackers blew up Qari Khalid's house

([X/@SaleemMehsud](#), December 5, 2024). This suggests that evidence had emerged that indicated Qari Khalid's involvement in the killing—or at very least local sentiment pushed in that direction—leading to the targeting of his home in revenge.

### **The Target: Shahid Umar**

Shahid Umar's real name was Rahimullah, and he hailed from Bajaur, a tribal district in Pakistan bordering Kunar. He came from an influential family in the Chinagay Area of Bajaur. He was a close relative to Maulvi Faqir Muhammad, a founding member and deputy leader of the TTP ([X/@taahir\\_khan](#), December 3, 2024). Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, members of the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda, along with other foreign and Pakistani militants, fled across the border into Pakistan, turning Bajaur into a hub for the insurgency. [8] Maulvi Faqir Muhammad, with the help of local tribespeople, established a network of safe havens that proved crucial for militants in Bajaur. As a result, Bajaur quickly became a key stronghold for militants who would go on to conduct attacks both across the border in Kunar and within their district in Pakistan itself.

Shahid Umar joined the insurgency around 19, likely in 2002, when militancy came to Bajaur. He was closely associated with Maulvi Faqir Muhammad even then, serving as his secretary, bodyguard, and trusted companion. In February 2013, the former Afghan government arrested Shahid Umar in the border district of Mohmand Dara in Nangarhar Province while he was traveling with Maulvi Faqir Muhammad ([Dawn](#), February 18, 2013). The two were detained and imprisoned in Bagram prison near Kabul. However, after serving an eight-year-long sentence, Afghan authorities released the then 38-year-old Shahid Umar in April 2021.

In June 2021, the TTP announced shadow governors for the first time and appointed Shahid Umar as shadow governor for his native district, Bajaur

([X/@talhaahmad967](#), June 17, 2021). In 2022, he was then assigned as the shadow governor for the southern Dera Ismail Khan Division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province ([X/@valle\\_riccardo](#), December 30, 2022). This division includes South Waziristan, the birthplace of the TTP, and hosts the group's major operational network. In the next year's appointments, Shahid Umar was made the deputy governor for the Malakand Division ([X/@SaleemMehsud](#), December 31, 2022). Malakand is the TTP's largest organisational unit in terms of number of militants and includes longstanding strongholds like Bajaur and Swat.

In April 2022—when Qari Khalid was an Afghan Taliban official and therefore still an ally of Shahid Umar—the latter was targeted in Kunar Province by Pakistan in the country's first aerial bombing of alleged TTP hideouts in Afghanistan ([The Express Tribune](#) [Pakistan], April 19, 2022). Shahid Umar survived that attack.

Finally, in January 2024, as part of the new set of appointments, Shahid Umar was elevated to head the Northern Zone Military Commission ([X/@abdsayedd](#), January 4, 2024). The TTP conducts all its attacks in Pakistan under the Military Commission, which is divided into two "zones," the Northern Zone and the Southern Zone. [9]

## Conclusion

Before his arrest in 2013, Shahid Umar was not a significant military figure within the TTP's ranks in Bajaur. Many of the senior Bajauri commanders either defected to Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) in 2015 or were killed in U.S. operations in Afghanistan. These included notable leaders such as Maulvi Abu Bakr, who was the founding head of ISKP in Bajaur; Abdul Rehman Ghalib, who became ISKP's third emir in 2017 under the under the *nom de guerre* Abu Saeed al-Muhajir ([Afghanistan Analysts Network](#), July 23, 2017); and Maulvi Dadullah, who was the head of TTP in Bajaur and was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Kunar in 2012 ([The Express](#)

[Tribune](#) [Pakistan], August 26, 2012). Other senior commanders like Maulvi Faqir Mohammad became less relevant on the military front due to age or other personal constraints. Following his release, Shahid Umar successfully filled the vacuum in the TTP's military leadership in Bajaur, establishing himself as a key figure in the organization. As a result, his death represents a significant blow to the TTP, particularly its Bajaur chapter.

As previously mentioned, Shahid Umar's death under Taliban rule represents the most significant killing of a TTP commander under Afghan Taliban rule to date. In January 2022, the former TTP spokesperson Mufti Khalid Balti was killed in a mysterious attack in Nangarhar's Mohmand Dara District, an incident that the TTP also attributed to a covert operation funded by Pakistan's security agencies (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), March 3, 2022). After being released from six years of imprisonment in Bagram following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021, Balti, unlike Shahid Umar, remained an ordinary member and was unable to secure any key position within the group. Similarly, in August 2022, Umar Khalid Khorasani, a member of the TTP's central shura council and founder of the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar faction (JuA), was killed in a mysterious attack in south-eastern Afghanistan's Paktika Province. However, his close associates allege that his death was a result of internal disputes rather than the involvement of Pakistani security forces ([X/@cozyduke apt29](#), January 17, 2024). This leaves Shahid Umar as the most senior TTP commander to be killed under Afghan Taliban rule.

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## Notes:

[1] Author's interactions with local sources in Kunar, December 5, 2024.

[2] Author's interactions with local sources in Kunar, December 5, 2024.

[3] Author's interactions with local sources in Kunar, December 5, 2024.

[4] Author's interactions with local sources in Kunar, December 5, 2024.

[5] Author's interactions with local sources in Kunar, December 5, 2024.

[6] Author's interactions with local sources in Kunar, December 5, 2024.

[7] After the successful operations by security forces in Bajaur in 2010, militants settled in the border areas of Kunar adjacent to Bajaur. The tribes residing in this area are settled on both sides of the Kunar-Bajaur border and have longstanding tribal ties and relationships, which have allowed them to host people from both regions.

[8] For details, see Syed Salim Shahzad, *Inside al-Qaeda and Taliban: Beyond Bin Laden and 9/11* (Pluto Press: London, UK, 2011)

[9] The Northern Zone Commission oversees northern and central divisions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including Malakand, Peshawar, Hazara, and Mardan, as well as nearby areas beyond Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In March 2024, after reconciling with the former Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) faction, the TTP appointed Umar Mukaram Khurasani, the leader of JuA, as the head of the Northern Zone Military Commission, with Shahid Umar serving as his deputy until his death.

## **Ataullah Abu Ammar Al Jununi: Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army Leader Arrested in Bangladesh**

*Khandakar Tahmid Rejwan*

### **Executive Summary**

- On April 18, the infamous Rohingya militant leader Ataullah Abu Ammar Al Jununi was captured by Bangladeshi counterterrorist forces. Ataullah was formerly the head of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a militia that played a key role in the 2017 Rohingya crisis and has since taken over Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh and turned them into hubs for criminal activity and militancy.
- While Ataullah has fought the government of Myanmar in the past, he presently appears to be allied with the military junta that took power in 2021 against the other various ethnic militias active in the country's ongoing civil war. Ataullah has also had an evolving relationship with Bangladesh in the past; his group's use of human and drug trafficking in the camps to obtain funds and a string of murders made him a target for Bangladesh's security forces.

On April 18, Battalion-11 of Bangladesh's elite counterterrorism unit, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), conducted a raid in Siddhirganj sub-district near the industrial city of Narayanganj. In the raid, the RAB captured infamous Rohingya militant leader Ataullah Abu Ammar Al Jununi ([New Age](#) [Bangladesh], March 18). Ataullah is



the founding leader and chief military strategist of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) ([Southeast Asia Globe](#), February 16, 2017). His military offensive in 2017 was a catalyst for the Rohingya crisis, which has persisted to the present. In addition, his involvement in criminal activities in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh and Myanmar's civil war has made him a notorious militant leader in both countries ([The Daily Star](#) [Bangladesh], March 19).

### **Ataullah's Early Life**

Besides the *nom de guerre* of Abu Ammar Al Jununi and Hafiz Tohar, Ataullah is also known as Amer Abu Amar. He was born in 1977 in a refugee camp in Karachi, Pakistan ([Benar News](#), March 21). Before Ataullah's birth, his family resided in Buthidaung township of Rakhine State in Myanmar. His family fled Myanmar when the military cracked down on the Rohingya people in the 1960s. After fleeing Rakhine State, Ataullah's family travelled a long way from Jashore, Bangladesh, to Kolkata, India. From there, they moved to Kashmir and crossed the border to settle in Pakistan ([Dhaka Tribune](#), October 20, 2017).

At an early age, Ataullah relocated from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia. He was educated in Islamic religious schools (madrassas) in Mecca and became fluent in Arabic, which helped him become a religious scholar. The people of his community also liked and respected him due to his generous and modest behavior. He was later employed as an imam in a mosque adjacent to Highway 40, which connects Jeddah and Riyadh and traverses the Arabian Peninsula ([Asia Times](#), August 28, 2017; [Dhaka Tribune](#), October 20, 2017). There, he received a salary of 3000 riyal (approximately \$800) and earned the patronage of a Saudi sheikh, leading a decent life compared to other Rohingya expatriates ([Southeast Asia Globe](#), February 16, 2017; [Dhaka Tribune](#), October 20, 2017).

### **Forming the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)**

In 2012, communal riots and violence involving Muslim Rohingya broke out around Rakhine. This resulted in severe persecution and internal displacement of the Rohingya in the state ([Al Jazeera](#), September 13, 2017). Ataullah was shocked by such incidents, prompting him to form the ARSA as a homegrown resistance to Rohingya persecution and systemic abuses by the Myanmar government. Some speculate that Ataullah visited Rakhine State immediately after the June 2012 violence, but this account is disputed, and as of yet, there are no eyewitnesses to this claim ([Dhaka Tribune](#), October 20, 2017).

What is confirmed from the local Rohingya and one of the ARSA spokespeople, Abdullah, is that Ataullah established contacts with Rohingya youths in Rakhine and first started recruiting them for his cause in 2013 ([Asia Times](#), August 28, 2017). His organization was originally named Harakah al-Yakin (HaY) ("Faith Movement"), which was changed in 2017 to the ARSA ([RFA](#), September 1, 2017). Ataullah clandestinely trained ARSA recruits in military operations throughout 2014 ([Asia Times](#), August 28, 2017). In 2015, Rohingya people saw Ataullah in Saudi Arabia working in a mosque until he returned to Rakhine in 2016 to lead the ARSA's anti-government insurgency ([Dhaka Tribune](#), October 20, 2017). Despite being a well-behaved and competent administrator, he was rarely seen among ordinary ARSA members, however ([Asia Times](#), August 28, 2017).

### **The ARSA's 2016–2017 Offensives and the Rohingya Crisis**

On October 9, 2016, Ataullah ordered his first explicit offensive against Myanmar's government in a coordinated attack on three police outposts in Maungdaw and Rathedaung townships. This killed 9 police officers and was the group's first time making international headlines (see

[Terrorism Monitor](#), November 10, 2017). Ataullah also publicly revealed himself to the world in a video statement after the attack on the outpost ([Al Jazeera](#), September 13, 2017).

On August 18, 2017, Ataullah released a video statement to justify the ARSA's actions as an answer to abuses by the Myanmar government and its security forces against the Rohingya ([Radio Free Asia](#), September 1, 2017). A week after this statement, a coordinated ARSA attack on around 30 security outposts killed at least 12 government personnel ([Xinhua](#), August 28, 2017). On the same day, Ataullah's group also massacred Hindus in the village of Kha Maung Seik and later killed seven members of the Mro minority. In response, Myanmar's security forces started a brutal area clearance operation in Rakhine State, which triggered a mass exodus of Rohingya into Bangladesh and became known as the "Rohingya Crisis of 2017" ([Xinhua](#), August 31, 2017; [Dhaka Tribune](#), October 18, 2017; [The Straits Times](#), May 23, 2018).

### **Post-2017 Rohingya Crisis**

The clearance operation in Rakhine effectively dislodged and weakened the ARSA. Ataullah, however, managed to survive the operation and went into hiding. Before his arrest, he was believed to have run the group by moving back and forth between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Despite dire conditions and setbacks, he decided to keep the group alive by reorganizing it within the confines of the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh ([Asia Times](#), May 5, 2020). There, he concentrated the group's activities on establishing dominance within the camp by taking down rival Rohingya armed groups ([Prothom Alo](#), October 16, 2021). By 2023, the ARSA had established a significant presence within the camps ([The Daily Star](#) [Bangladesh], February 15, 2023). Once this was achieved, he involved the ARSA in various criminal activities, such as human and drug trafficking

([Prothom Alo](#), October 16, 2021; [Dhaka Tribune](#), June 20, 2024).

Amid reviving the ARSA, Ataullah eliminated any individual who defected from the group or opposed its activities in the camps ([Benar News](#), August 24, 2022; [The Daily Star](#) [Bangladesh], January 14, 2024). In September 2021, he also ordered the assassination of a popular Rohingya social worker and activist, Muhib Ullah, due to his growing popularity and refusal to work with the ARSA ([Radio Free Asia](#), June 14, 2022). His group regularly threatened and killed civilians within the camp, including community leaders who cooperated with his enemies ([Prothom Alo](#), October 16, 2021; [Radio Free Asia](#), December 20, 2021). During a joint anti-narcotic raid in 2022, Ataullah infamously shot and killed Rizwan Rushdie in November 2022, an intelligence officer and squadron leader of the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) of Bangladesh. This occurred during a counter-narcotics operation in an area considered no-man's land near the border with Myanmar ([Benar News](#), December 2, 2022). He also orchestrated a series of killings, which left seven people dead just after International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor Karim A.A. Khan visited Camp-8 of Ukhiya in Cox's Bazar District ([The Daily Star](#) [Bangladesh], July 9, 2023).

### **Conflict and Collaboration with the SAC**

From 2018 to 2021, Ataullah directed a low-intensity insurgency primarily in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships by conducting surprise ambushes and indiscriminate mine attacks ([Radio Free Asia](#), January 5, 2018; [Mizzima](#), January 21, 2019; [The Irrawaddy](#), November 18, 2020). After the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar, the military-led State Administration Council (SAC) took power in the country, which initiated a civil war. Ataullah pledged solidarity with the pro-democratic National Unity Government (NUG) to fight against the SAC. The NUG rejected his offer, however, due to the

ARSA's poor reputation ([Benar News](#), February 2, 2023).

From November 2023, the Arakan Army (AA), one of the largest ethnic rebel groups, started taking large swaths of territory from the SAC in Rakhine State. Ataullah thus decided to collude with those who would otherwise be his main enemy, the SAC. He forcibly recruited Rohingya to fight alongside SAC forces. In April 2024, Ataullah's men jointly cooperated with the SAC to resist the AA's advances in Rakhine ([Frontier Myanmar](#), May 7, 2025).

## Conclusion

Ataullah can be considered a prudent, if brutal, militant leader. His insurgents lacked sufficient arms and ammunition to be effective in combat, which he overcame using human wave tactics. He also ensured the group's survival by relocating its core operations to refugee camps in Bangladesh ([Radio Free Asia](#), February 2, 2023). Further, he managed to fund the group's operations locally by involving it in cross-border criminal activities and fleecing civilians within the camps ([Rohingya Khobor](#), May 14, 2024). Allying with the SAC also helped his group acquire sophisticated weapons and offered access to training and combat engagements with other groups, turning the ARSA into the battle-hardened force it is today ([The Transnational Institute](#), September 20, 2023; [The Irrawaddy](#), May 24, 2024).

Ataullah also maintained a public presence through statements, videos, and interviews. Although Facebook banned the ARSA, Ataullah's messages are still available on the group's X account ([X/@ARSA Official](#), March 2017). In December 2019, he appeared in a video thanking the Gambia for filing genocide charges against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice, and in February 2022, he was interviewed on Jamuna TV in Bangladesh ([Jamuna TV](#), February 24, 2022; [The Irrawaddy](#), December 11, 2019). He resurfaced in October 2022 in an ARSA video celebrating

the anniversary of their 2016 attacks ([Radio Free Asia](#), October 11, 2022). This demonstrates his comfort level with being in the media.

In addition, Ataullah has significant external links not only in Saudi Arabia and the Indian subcontinent but also in Malaysia and Indonesia, where a large community of Rohingya is based. Ataullah received financial support from these sympathetic diaspora communities and conducted recruitment efforts in both countries ([Free Malaysia Today](#), 2018). Law enforcement recovered Malaysian currency when Ataullah was arrested, confirming his recent links to Malaysia, for example ([New Age](#) [Bangladesh], March 18, 2025). Although there is no concrete evidence of his links to international terrorists, his mentor is believed to be Abdus Qadoos, who has ties to Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), one of South Asia's most prominent Islamic terrorist organizations ([The Irrawaddy](#), September 22, 2017). LeT or a wing of it is believed to have been the group responsible for the Pahalgam attack in April that killed 26 and brought India and Pakistan to the verge of war ([Times of India](#), June 23).

Ataullah is not especially rational, as demonstrated by his futile offensive in August 2017 ([The Straits Times](#), September 10, 2017). He also killed other religious and ethnic minorities, which made the ARSA unacceptable among locals in Rakhine State ([Hindustan Times](#), September 7, 2017). In the Rohingya camps, assassinations, revenge killings, and criminal activities further made Ataullah and the ARSA severely unpopular among ordinary Rohingya ([New Age](#) [Bangladesh], December 8, 2021; [Anadolu Ajansi](#), July 22, 2023; [Frontier Myanmar](#), March 19). He is even believed to have controlled at least six torture cells within the camps ([Dhaka Tribune](#), October 27, 2023).

Although previously he praised Bangladesh for sheltering Rohingya, Ataullah failed to secure Dhaka's blessings due to his actions

([The Irrawaddy](#), October 3, 2017). His brother, Md Shah Ali, was arrested in Bangladesh in January 2022 ([Daily Observer](#) [Bangladesh], January 17, 2022). Several key deputies of Ataullah, including his personal secretary Noman, finance head Karim, and personal bodyguard Akij were also captured by Bangladeshi security forces in consecutive raids, which weakened the ARSA ([The Business Standard](#) [Bangladesh], October 4, 2023; [Dhaka Tribune](#), [The Daily Star](#) [Bangladesh], March 14, 2024; May 23, 2024; [Dhaka Tribune](#), September 20, 2024). His alliance with the SAC and operations against the AA also backfired, as the AA effectively took complete control over Northern Rakhine, which had formerly been the primary operational area of the ARSA ([Radio Free Asia](#), April 6, 2024).

Thus, Ataullah's arrest came at a crucial moment when Bangladesh is informally negotiating with the AA about Rohingya refugee repatriation and border security. The ARSA is seen as the most prominent spoiler to these negotiation agendas. The incarceration of Ataullah is thus a strategic win for Bangladesh in containing militant and criminal activities along the Bangladesh–Myanmar border ([Radio Free Asia](#), March 23). His arrest is, overall, a blow to the ARSA but a relief to the Rohingyas living in refugee camps in Bangladesh.

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