



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

p.1

Brief: Abdiweli M. Yusuf:
Islamic State Financer
Captured in Somalia

Jacob Zenn

p.2

Hikmat al-Hijri: Druze
Cleric Struggles Against
Syrian Government

Rami Jameel

p.4

Ayaba Cho Lucas:
Separatist Campaign
Against Cameroon
Devolves Into 'War of
Shame'

Andrew McGregor

p.7

Sa'ad bin Atef Awlaki:
AQAP's Most Wanted
Leader

Daniele Garofalo

VOLUME XVI, ISSUE 2 | February 2025

Abdiweli M. Yusuf: Islamic State Financer Captured in Somalia

Jacob Zenn

Executive Summary

- Puntland security forces captured Abdiweli Mohamed Yusuf, the Islamic State-Somalia (IS-Somalia) finance chief, on July 25. While IS-Somalia remains a small force, the removal of key leaders such as Yusuf signals mounting pressure on IS's financial and operational capacity, potentially weakening the group's broader presence across Africa.
- Yusuf's detention follows the 2023 killing of his predecessor Bilal al-Sudani, further constraining IS's global funding network. Yusuf managed IS-Somalia's finances, oversaw fund transfers to IS-Central Africa Province (IS-CAP), recruited foreign fighters, and procured supplies. He generated millions of dollars through extortion and mobile-money systems, coordinating with other IS operatives such as assassination squad leader Abdirahman Shirwac Aw-Saciid.

On July 25, Puntland security forces captured the head of the Islamic State's financial department, Abdiweli Mohamed Yusuf. As Islamic State-Somalia Province (IS-Somalia) appears to be the regional financial hub for Islamic State (IS) operations in Africa, Yusuf's removal from IS-Somalia could have a broader impact on IS's overall expansion on the continent ([Agenzia Nova](#), July 25). Moreover, Yusuf's capture came only two years after the former IS-Somalia financial head, Bilal al-Sudani, was killed in a U.S. airstrike on an underground complex in northern Somalia. This further suggests that IS's global funding apparatus is now ever more constrained ([Garowe Online](#), January 27).

Yusuf was sanctioned by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) as early as 2023, two years before his capture ([U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), July 23). At that time, he was reportedly regularly meeting with the al-Karrar office head (responsible for operations in East Africa) and reported to the current IS-Somalia al-Karrar office leader, Abdul Qadir Mumin, as well as then-IS-Somalia caliph, Abdirahman Fahiye Isse Mohamud ([Hiiran Online](#), January 6). Both were designated

as terrorists and sanctioned in 2016 and 2022, respectively.

Mumin's role was more similar to Yusuf's, considering that Yusuf financed Islamic State–Central Africa Province (IS–CAP) as it transitioned away from being the "Allied Democratic Forces" (ADF) ([France 24](#), June 1). It seems that Yusuf's role was overseeing the delivery of funds to IS–CAP or other African IS cells after Mumin gave orders. In addition, Yusuf recruited foreign fighters and acquired supplies and ammunition for IS–Somalia while also managing the group's revenue and facilitating the transfers of funds ([Horn Observer](#), July 28, 2023).

The Puntland government also confirmed Yusuf's role in IS–Somalia, identifying him as the group's "finance chief." Puntland officials also noted that "American partners" took part in the operation to capture him ([X/@SomaliSecurityI](#), July 25). Yusuf was based in Somalia's Bari region, where only months earlier, the head of IS–Somalia's assassination squad, Abdirahman Shirwac Aw-Saciid, surrendered to Puntland authorities. Aw-Saciid's role in extorting local businesses to raise funds for IS–Somalia suggests that he coordinated with Yusuf, given their mutual focus on financing and the fact that they operated in the same area of Somalia ([Al Jazeera](#), February 3). Yusuf specifically oversaw funding networks that generated an estimated \$2.5 million in 2021. This was accomplished, like in Aw-Saacid's case, through extorting local businesses, in addition to exploiting mobile-money systems ([X/@TheDailySomalia](#), July 25).

Although Mumin remains at large, the surrender of Aw-Saciid, elimination of Bilal al-Sudani, and now capture of Abdiweli M. Yusuf could foretell the weakening of IS–Somalia as its leadership is degraded. IS–Somalia, while a small fighting force within its own country, previously functioned as IS's chief financial conduit in Africa. Thus, the recent victories against IS–Somalia could portend the weakening of IS's capabilities across the African continent.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Militant Leadership Monitor.

Hikmat al-Hijri: Druze Cleric Struggles Against Syrian Government

Rami Jameel

Executive Summary

- In July 2025, heavy communal violence in Suwayda between Druze and Bedouin tribes escalated into open battles with Syrian government forces, leaving hundreds dead. The clashes marked the most serious confrontation yet between Druze fighters and the new regime under President Ahmed al-Sharaa. At the center of the conflict is Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, a key Druze cleric, who rejected compromise and labeled Damascus' security forces "armed gangs." His leadership consolidated Druze resistance and positioned him as the main obstacle to al-Sharaa's authority in southern Syria.
- Once a staunch ally to al-Assad, al-Hijri has reinvented himself as a symbol of Druze defiance—leveraging both autonomy demands and external support. His pro-Israel alignment breaks with the Druze tradition of host-state loyalty and now defines the geopolitical stakes of Suwayda's confrontation with Damascus.
- Al-Hijri made an unprecedented public appeal for international protection, explicitly welcoming Israeli intervention. Israel responded with airstrikes on Syrian Army sites near Damascus, signaling both its readiness to shield the Druze and the extent of al-Hijri's international support.

Once a staunch ally of former Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, prominent Druze cleric Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri has reinvented himself as a symbol of Druze

defiance against the new regime. Al-Hijri has consistently advocated for the establishment of a secular and inclusive government in Syria, more rights for the Druze, and recognition from the government of the special status of southwest Syria's predominantly Druze Suwayda province. Al-Hijri is well known for his uncompromising positions against the new Syrian president, Ahmed al-Sharaa's government, and his pro-Israel alignment breaks with Druze tradition, defining the geopolitical stakes of Suwayda's confrontation with Damascus.

Hundreds of Syrians were killed in communal violence in Suwayda province in mid-July. The violence reportedly began with kidnappings and public humiliation of individuals from the local Druze and Bedouin communities and expanded quickly, developing into full-scale armed engagement between the two groups. When the government of al-Sharaa sent in its security and paramilitary forces, they faced resistance from Druze fighters who viewed the government forces as being allied to the Bedouins ([Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#), August 6).

Al-Hijri's demands, including his opposition to government forces deployed to Suwayda, have been perceived by the transitional government and its supporters as al-Hijri seeking de facto self-rule ([Al Watan](#), July 27).

Al-Hijri's Handling of the Clashes

During and since the July clashes, some Druze leaders expressed support for the transitional government in an attempt to calm unrest, such as Sheikh Laith Balous ([Alikhabriya Syria](#), August 1). Al-Hijri rejects this approach, instead vowing to continue fighting, calling the General Security Service "armed gangs that falsely call themselves a government" ([Sky News Arabia](#), July 16). [1]

Al-Hijri made a rare public plea calling upon the international community to save the Druze in Syria from a massacre, in which

he specifically named U.S. President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Even before Netanyahu took action on behalf of al-Hijri, the Syrian government and its supporters accused al-Hijri of being a separatist and traitor ([Elnashra](#), July 16).

Al-Hijri's History

The Druze religion is an offshoot of Shi'a Islam. Its followers have historically lived in mountainous areas between Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan. They have historically faced persecution by "orthodox" Muslims who view them as heretics. The Druze faith is passed down solely by birth with no conversions permitted, making its members a distinct ethnoreligious group ([Independent Arabia](#), March 11).

Al-Hijri carries the title of *Shaykh al-'Aql* (in Arabic: *الاعقل شديخ*, literally "Elder of Reason"), the senior-most clerical position within the Druze faith. He is also the latest member of the al-Hijri family to inherit the title, which has been passed down since the 19th century. Two other families in Suwayda, al-Jarbou and al-Hinnawi, boast members holding the same title. Among their peers, the al-Hijri family holds the largest influence, owing to their place in the village of Qanawat, the historic seat of the Syrian Druzes' spiritual leadership.

Hikmat al-Hijri was born in 1965 in Venezuela, where his father had immigrated for business. Soon, the family returned to Syria. Al-Hijri grew up in Suwayda, studied law at the University of Damascus in the late 1980s, and for the following two decades lived between Syria and Venezuela. He was still in Venezuela when the Syrian Civil War started in 2011, but returned to Syria to succeed his brother, Ahmad al-Hijri, who died in a car accident ([Roaya News](#), July 16).

Al-Hijri and the Syrian Uprising

The Syrian Druze were cautious to join the uprising that broke out against the al-Assad regime in 2011, fearful of the

predominantly Islamist nature of the opposition to the Assad regime. Syria's minorities had been broadly supportive of the al-Assad government as bulwarks against Sunni persecution, regardless of other grievances they may have had with the family's authoritarian leaders over the years ([Al Jazeera](#), September 19, 2012).

When al-Hijri became "Shaykh al-'Aql," he fully aligned himself with the al-Assad regime. With Islamists dominating the ranks of the opposition, al-Hijri urged the Druze community to join the Syrian Army and fight the rebels. As such, Suwayda sustained far less damage than most other regions of Syria during the nation's bloody 13-year-long civil war, although it did see Druze militias successfully defending against Islamic State fighters in 2018 ([Diyaruna](#), July 26, 2018; [Al-Araby Al-Jadeed](#), July 17).

Insulting Al-Hijri

In 2021, al-Hijri was seriously insulted in a phone call with the Head of Military Intelligence in Suwayda, in what would cause a fundamental break in Druze-regime relations. Al-Hijri was reportedly inquiring about an arrested Druze in custody, likely attempting to intercede, when the Head of Military Intelligence, Luay al-'Ali, verbally accosted him and the Druze community writ large ([Arabic Post](#), July 17).

The slight, which occurred amid rising discontent around Syria's economic conditions, sparked public protest across Suwayda. Al-Hijri turned wholeheartedly against the regime and led the Suwayda uprising, which was unprecedented in its nature and scale among the Druze, extending even into Suwayda's rural regions outside the provincial capital.

Changing Conflict Dynamics

Al-Hijri's stoking of dissent challenged the dynamics of the Syrian conflict at that stage. The Suwayda protests reinvigorated the opposition against al-Assad. This was

due to the fact that al-Hijri positioned the Druze protests not as a sectarian issue, but as a response to the mounting resentment of the Syrian people toward the country's deteriorating economic situation as a result of the war ([North Press Agency](#), September 13, 2023).

By the end of 2024, al-Hijri consolidated his position not only as the most influential leader of the Druze community but as a symbol of Druze rejection of al-Assad's rule. As the al-Assad regime was toppled going into December 2024, al-Hijri and his followers again played a role in accelerating the end of the regime, supporting the opposition's military campaign in Aleppo and Damascus. Al-Hijri welcomed al-Assad's fall, but his celebration of the new government was cautious. Al-Hijri hoped the new al-Sharaa government would recognize the special status of the province and create a Syria unmarred by religious sectarianism or extremism ([Deutsche Welle](#), January 7).

Many in the Sunni opposition to al-Assad suggested that al-Hijri's stance against al-Assad was driven by personal and sectarian grievances, rather than genuine conviction. This opinion was widely held, even as the Druze were celebrated for helping depose al-Assad. Nonetheless, this newfound respect did not diminish the mutual skepticism between al-Hijri and the new Islamist government of al-Sharaa, and resentment between the transitional government and al-Hijri mounted in the following months. Al-Hijri refused to disarm the Druze militia and hand Suwayda province to the new government, insisting instead on partial autonomy ([Shaam](#), February 18).

Spiraling Into Conflict in Suwayda

No major confrontation took place in the first couple of months after al-Assad's fall. Still, sporadic altercations occurred in Druze areas outside Suwayda. The security situation deteriorated in April, when a recording of a Druze person allegedly disrespecting the Prophet Muhammad

drove Sunnis to attack Druze neighborhoods in Damascus. Dozens were killed in the clashes between Sunni Syrians (including security forces) and Druze ([Sky News Arabia](#), April 29).

The situation escalated further when Israel came to the assistance of the Druze, responding to the Israeli Druzes' fear for their coreligionists in Syria. Israel accordingly extended the strong ties between Jews and Druze in Israel to include the Druze in Syria, and launched strikes on high-level Syrian Army sites outside of Damascus. This was intended as a demonstration of Israel's commitment to protect and support the Syrian Druze and deter further operations by the Syrian government against them ([Al Arabiya](#), July 16).

The sectarian crisis shook the fragile relations between the Druze and the new Syrian government. Druze-Sunni or Druze-government violence was contextualized by many in relation to the February violence against the Alawites by various militias, including those associated with the new regime, showing the transitional government's tendency to victimize ethnoreligious minorities ([Middle East Online](#), March 8). Al-Hijri publicly called for "international protection" for the Druze and welcomed Israeli support.

Under President al-Sharaa, Syria had appeared to slightly soften its position toward Israel, in spite of Syria's historic rivalry with its southwestern neighbor. However, al-Hijri's demand for Israeli intervention clearly crossed a red line in Damascus, which saw the move as a sign of a new separatist threat ([Ultra Syria](#), May 10).

Conclusion

Despite the early clashes between the Druze and the new Syrian government after the fall of al-Assad, the violence in July shocked spectators with their scale and intensity, with death counts in the hundreds. The Israeli intervention into

Suwayda did not immediately provide protection for the Druze, and neither Israel nor the Druze seemed to expect the extent and impact of Sunni tribal mobilization from other parts of Syria into Suwayda. Eventually, al-Hijri was forced to accept an agreement that let the government forces operate among the province's tribes ([Alquds Alarabi](#), July 26).

Tensions remain high in Suwayda, although violence seems to have ebbed. Al-Hijri's role in this phase of the conflict has enshrined him as a symbol of Druze resistance to al-Sharaa's authority and as the most influential spiritual leader of the Syrian Druze. His challenge to the authority of the new Syrian government and his embrace of Israel represent a bold strategic shift from traditional Druze loyalty to their country of residence.

The issue of political-religious fragmentation remains a crucial matter dividing the Syrian Druze community. Al-Hijri is only one of three senior clerics in Suwayda (known collectively as the *Mashā'ikh al-'Aql* (Arabic: *المشايخ العقل*, literally "Sheikhs of Reason"). The other two, Yusuf al-Jarbou and Hammoud al-Hinnawi, have taken more moderate stances, although the Druze have remained overwhelmingly united in their position against the Bedouin tribes and government ([Enab Baladi English](#), August 10). The condemnation al-Hijri has received from the Sunni majority is to be expected in a divided country like Syria. The Druze may have suffered losses from the July clashes, but appear far more likely to follow the decisive strategies of al-Hijri than submit to the transitional government in Damascus as it continues to erode their trust.

Rami Jameel is a researcher who specializes in militant groups in the Middle East and North Africa. He focuses on the political and military conflicts in the region and their impact on global security.

Notes:

[1] See also a video by the prominent pro-government propagandist Hadi Abdullah

that condemned al-Hijri, which was published on July 15: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrB7HlhIeFw>

Ayaba Cho Lucas: Separatist Campaign Against Cameroon Devolves Into 'War of Shame'

Andrew McGregor

Executive Summary

- Dr. Ayaba Cho Lucas, head of the Ambazonia Governing Council (AGovC), has led Cameroon's nine-year anglophone separatist insurgency from exile in Europe. Advocating "eye for an eye" violence, Ayaba helped form the Ambazonian Defense Force (ADF), which, though lightly armed, has carried out kidnappings, extortion, assassinations, school burnings, and IED attacks. These tactics alienated many anglophone civilians and led Ayaba himself to lament that the struggle had deteriorated into a "war of shame."
- Once a student activist expelled from university, Ayaba fled as a stowaway to Germany, where he became a refugee rights campaigner and anti-racist activist before transforming into the leader of a secessionist militia. Ayaba lives a dual life—denouncing European governments for racism and publishing memoirs about refugee exclusion, while simultaneously directing a militia accused of terrorizing his own people.
- Arrested in Norway in September 2024 on charges of incitement and financing violence, Ayaba remains in detention while his deputy leads the AGovC. His weakened standing among separatist factions leaves the movement fractured, even as Cameroon's aging leadership faces growing pressure to resolve the separatist conflict while also confronting Boko Haram in the north.

For nine years, a brutal but little-noticed war of attrition and reprisal has been carried out by anglophone separatists in

the region once known as British Cameroon. The separatists are fighting their region's absorption into the francophone state of Cameroon (former French Cameroon) through a series of small-scale actions in a war without fronts. One of the main leaders of this revolt is Dr. Ayaba Cho Lucas, currently imprisoned in Norway, who advocates "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" violence in pursuit of the establishment of an independent "Federal Republic of Ambazonia." This proposed state of eight million people would become independent of Cameroon, or what the militants refer to as "La République" ([Africa Report](#), June 8, 2023).

As leader of the rebel Ambazonia Governing Council (AGovC), the 53-year-old German national leads an insurgency surviving primarily on funding from diaspora donations without backing from any state. The region's separatism is complicated by the fact that much of Cameroon's natural resources and minerals are found in the anglophone region, despite it comprising only 20 percent of Cameroon's total area.

Background on Ambazonia

The name "Ambazonia" derives from Amba Bay in southwestern Cameroon, where an English-speaking settlement was founded in 1858. By 1884, Amba Bay was part of a larger region known as "Kamerun," a German colony created after German explorer Gustav Nachtigal concluded a number of treaties with local rulers. German rule ended in 1916 after a hard-fought campaign by British, French, and Belgian forces that defeated the Germans and their African troops. Under post-war League of Nations mandates, most of the former colony became French Cameroon, while the northwest and southwest regions (collectively known as the "Southern Cameroons") became British Cameroon, where the continued growth of an anglophone community was encouraged.

French Cameroon became independent in 1960, while the independence of British Cameroon a year later was followed by a UN-organized referendum that approved its incorporation into a two-region Federal Republic of Cameroon ([Guardian](#) [Lagos], September 18, 2021; [SAIS Review of International Affairs](#), November 8, 2022). However, as the new Cameroonian state grew increasingly authoritarian, the federal state apparatus responsible for guaranteeing the rights of anglophone Cameroonians was dissolved in 1972. Years of tension between Anglophones and francophone authorities erupted into large-scale protests in 2016, leading to militants declaring the independence of a new anglophone state, "Ambazonia," in 2017. Thousands have died in political violence since then, and nearly a million residents have been displaced ([New Humanitarian](#), July 8, 2020).

Ayaba's Early Life

Ayaba was born in northwest Cameroon in August 1972. He studied chemistry at the University of Buea before his 1995 expulsion for political activity after he led a protest against tuition hikes ([Africa Report](#), June 8, 2023). He also served as Secretary General of the Southern Cameroons Youth League (SCYL), a political movement of students formed in 1995, before his expulsion.

To escape political repression, Ayaba stowed away in 1998 with another refugee on a ship loaded with (in Ayaba's words) "stolen African lumber." Ayaba and his companion spent five days in hiding before emerging to "an angry crew." After 30 days at sea, Ayaba landed on German soil on July 30, 1998, and asked for political asylum. He was disappointed in his reception: "Germany tried to break my will, discounted my dignity, and imprisoned me for 16 days when I stood my ground seeking this illusion called freedom. The ship saved my life, but Germany took my dream hostage" ([The VOICE Refugee Forum Germany](#), November 22, 2006). Ayaba described his arrival in Germany as

"some accident of fate," but once there, he fought tenaciously to remain, while blaming his personal misfortunes on the "institutionalized racism and social exclusion" of his new hosts:

If your country did not colonize and exploit mine; if your country hadn't continued to lend support to the tyrant regime that holds my people in bondage [i.e., the regime of Paul Biya, president of Cameroon since 1982]; if your country hadn't wanted to dominate and rule the world, I would never have become a refugee. I would surely have not been dismissed from the university ([The VOICE Refugee Forum Germany](#), December 16, 2003).

Political Activism

In 2001, Ayaba organized a protest demanding the release of a refugee from Togo who was being deported by German authorities. Chants of "the Nazis kill and the State deports; it's all the same racist scum!" outside a government immigration office led to a charge of "insulting government officials" against Ayaba. He challenged every judgment, even those that might have concluded the case with a small fine, sending an otherwise minor case on a long and expensive journey through the German court system that eventually sentenced Ayaba to a brief confinement beginning on December 11, 2003 ([The VOICE Refugee Forum Germany](#), December 16, 2003).

During his absence from Cameroon, Ayaba served as a leading member of "The VOICE," a refugee organization representing the "diverse interests of refugees in Germany" based in Jena ([The VOICE Refugee Forum Germany](#), December 16, 2003). Most of the Ambazonian separatist leaders live in exile in Europe or the United States. These

leaders, like Ayaba, are often criticized for living abroad while the people they claim to represent suffer from violence inflicted by both sides of the nine-year-old struggle ([Cameroon-Concord](#), January 13).

In 2006, Ayaba published a semi-autobiographical work, *Not Guilty: We Versus Them, the Experience of an African Refugee*. During this time, Ayaba led many demonstrations against the deportation of failed refugee claimants and residential restrictions on African refugees. Friction with German authorities continued, with Ayaba declaring: "The German police, a relic of Hitler's notorious *Schutzstaffel* (SS), are the most visible instrument of state oppression that refugees in general, and blacks in particular, have to face" ([The VOICE Refugee Forum Germany](#), November 22, 2006). Provocative statements of this nature tested the patience of his hosts, leading to Ayaba's departure for Norway, where he once again obtained political asylum. Ayaba studied human rights and development at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences while focusing on the "marginalization" of Cameroon's anglophones ([Africa Report](#), June 8, 2023). In 2013, Ayaba became involved in the formation of AGovC, which formed from the merger of several smaller separatist groups and was dedicated to Ambazonian independence ([Africa Report](#), June 8, 2023).

Armed Rebellion

Protests broke out in anglophone Cameroon in November 2016 after the government placed monolingual Francophones in courts as staff and appointed francophone judges with no experience in the English common law used in anglophone regions ([Africa Is a Country](#), April 17). The government crackdown that followed helped inspire militant resistance. On January 28, 2017, Ayaba survived an assassination attempt in Antwerp that he blamed on Cameroon's *Direction Générale de la recherche Extérieure* (the DGRE, Cameroon's external security agency) ([Africa Report](#), June 8, 2023).

The Ambazonia Governing Council established its armed wing, the Ambazonian Defense Force (ADF), a day after its operatives struck a military base on September 8, killing three soldiers ([Cameroon Concord](#), September 11, 2017; [Daily News Cameroon](#), September 14, 2017). The movement claimed to have 7,500 “combat guerrillas with a mixture of urban warfare capabilities” ([Amazonian Governing Council](#), archived March 30, 2023). Separatist leader Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe declared the independence of Ambazonia on October 1, 2017, together with the formation of the Interim Government of Ambazonia (IG) with himself as leader.

The ADF is lightly armed with rifles, shotguns, home-made firearms, and machetes. To compensate for lacking armament, fighters rely heavily on amulets intended to repel bullets. Unable to directly confront the U.S.-trained and equipped Cameroonian army, the ADF often focuses on imposing its will on the civilian population. This is a difficult task, since ADF members exercise little authority in the villages and contend with opposition from local elders. Communications are rudimentary, and most war materiel is obtained from government stocks ([VICE](#), October 1, 2018).

Leadership Disputes

Several leading Ambazonian separatists taking refuge in Nigeria (including Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe) were arrested by Cameroonian agents working with Nigerian security forces in January 2018. They were repatriated to Cameroon to stand trial at a military court in Yaoundé, where they received life sentences on terrorism charges ([SAIS Review of International Affairs](#), November 8, 2022; [Africa Is a Country](#), April 17). A Nigerian court declared the arrests and expulsions illegal and ordered the return of the separatists, without effect ([Premium Times](#) [Lagos], March 2, 2019).

With Sisiku in prison on terrorism charges, Dr. Samuel Ikome Sako, a former pastor based in the United States, stepped into the position of acting interim president of the IG in February 2018. Sako blamed Nigeria, Cameroon, and the government of France for arranging the arrest and deportation of Sisiku and eleven other separatist leaders ([AfricaNews](#), February 11, 2018). Sisiku, however, rejected his replacement, and the IG movement split into “IG Sisiku” and “IG Sako” ([New Humanitarian](#), July 8, 2020). The other anglophone factions lined up behind one or the other leader, with Ayaba and the AGovC initially backing Sisiku, though Ayaba later withdrew his support, arguing that no one in detention was capable of carrying out necessary negotiations with the Cameroonian state.

A joint press conference on April 9, 2021, highlighted yet another dispute between Ayaba and Sako. Ayaba ultimately unsuccessfully attempted to form an alliance during the meeting between his followers and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a Nigerian separatist group led by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu (for more on Kanu, see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), October 10, 2017). Sako, however, insisted that there could be no comparison between the Biafran struggle and that of the Ambazonians: “There is one activist who carried out a propaganda stunt to attract some money from IPOB agitators around the world ... The people of the Southern Cameroons that we represent have not endorsed any form of alliance with IPOB” ([Guardian](#) [Lagos], September 18, 2021).

A Question of Methods

Ayaba and other anglophone separatists have found many ways to antagonize the people they claim to represent, including:

- Kidnappings for ransom or as punishment for defying the separatists. Kidnapping victims are sometimes taken to safe-houses in Nigeria, frustrating Cameroonian

efforts to recover the victims ([Africa Report](#), October 7, 2024);

- The collection of a so-called “liberation tax,” which must be paid in addition to federal taxes. The U.S.-based ADF spokesman, Dr. Tapang Ivo Tanku, announced in 2019 that anyone who failed to pay a “liberation war tax” would be kidnapped for ransom ([New Humanitarian](#), July 8, 2020; [Mimi Mefo Info](#), February 15);
- A regular but politically pointless and unpopular assassination campaign against civilians, targeting gendarmes, civil servants, or development workers. This inadvertently encourages young Anglophones to pursue their future in the relatively safer cities of francophone Cameroon;
- Attacks on plantation workers that contributed to creating a massive internally displaced population;
- Assaults on the education system that include burning schools and the murder of teachers;
- Provocation of Cameroonian forces by violence without visible results, except for frequent reprisals against anglophone civilians by government forces; and
- The use of IEDs at markets and other places that kill indiscriminately, which Ayaba claims are aimed at ending the “crime against humanity” of Cameroonian “colonialism” ([Mimi Memo Info](#), March 4, 2022; [Africa Report](#), October 7, 2024).

Consequences of Insurgency

Many young Anglophones, traditional chiefs, and business leaders have migrated to francophone cities to escape the violence. Social decay has set in with the deterioration of traditional family structures, forcing young girls to migrate to francophone Cameroon seeking work as prostitutes ([Cameroon-Concord](#), January 13). “Ghost Town” orders from the militants to close shops and schools are

also enforced with violence. One separatist video proclaimed, “We don’t want anyone out on October 1 [the anniversary of “independent Ambazonia”]. Anyone who opens a shop, drives a car, or is simply caught walking around will be killed” ([Africa Report](#), October 7, 2024). Shops that close on such occasions often find themselves shuttered for an additional period by Cameroonian authorities.

Decentralization of the independence fighters has created indiscipline in their ranks, with the search for cash a higher priority than the “liberation” of the anglophone community. A steady stream of accusations of brutality against citizens on the part of Ambazonian “freedom fighters” in 2021 led to a surprising response from Ayaba, who attacked the fighters’ behavior rather than defending it, describing a “war for freedom” that had transitioned into “a war of shame”:

I feel ashamed that brave men and women who’ve risen up to challenge Cameroon have become [petty] criminals trying to get food, going around harassing people, begging for food ... I do not only feel ashamed, I feel angry. Anger toward such persons more than I even have anger toward La République. It is a disgrace...

([Humananglemedia](#), January 27, 2021).

Arrest in Norway

Following accusations of incitement to crimes against humanity based on his social media posts and role in financing separatist violence, Ayaba was arrested by Norwegian authorities on September 25, 2024. He was succeeded as AGovC leader by its Ireland-based vice president, Julius Nyih, as he declared he would continue the armed struggle in Ambazonia: “You can arrest every Ambazonian, but the war will continue...” ([Cameroon News Agency](#), September 30).

Ayaba's detention has been extended numerous times for fear that he might destroy or tamper with evidence, intimidate witnesses, or fulfill known plans to flee to England ([Cameroon-Concord](#), January 13; [CameroonOnline.org](#), March 12). Meanwhile, Cameroon has failed to request his extradition.

One of the issues preventing a speedy resolution to the case concerns the legal definition of Ambazonia as a territory. The matter is unresolved as to whether it shall be a (self-declared) independent state or a sovereign part of Cameroon ([Cameroon-Concord](#), January 13). All interested parties are watching closely for any legal indication from Norway suggesting it recognizes anglophone Cameroon as an independent and sovereign entity.

Conclusion

Ayaba's supporters present him as a leader of the decolonization movement, deriding the accusations against him of supporting terrorism as a means of delegitimizing an authentic liberation struggle ([Cameroon-Concord](#), January 13). Despite this, Ayaba is not recognized as Ambazonia's leader or spokesman by a significant part of the armed separatist opposition, placing him in a weakened position for negotiations with the government, something already opposed by many in his own camp ([Africa Report](#), June 8, 2023). Efforts to find a resolution to the Ambazonian conflict are increasingly complicated by the Cameroonian state's growing conflict with Boko Haram in the country's north, which demands troops and political attention. The inflexible approach of 92-year-old Cameroonian president Paul Biya may have a short shelf life if his successor finds it necessary to deal with separatists like Cho in order to free up resources to fight the more powerful jihadists.

Andrew McGregor is Director of Aberfoyle International Security, a Toronto-based agency specializing in security issues related to the Islamic world. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Toronto's

Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations in 2000 and is a former Research Associate of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs.

Sa'ad bin Atef al-Awlaki: AQAP's Most Wanted Leader

Daniele Garofalo

Executive Summary

- Sa'ad bin Atef al-Awlaki was recently named head of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). An effective leader, al-Awlaki is expected to further entrench al-Qaeda in Yemen, while also positioning himself and AQAP as especially important contenders for leading affiliates within al-Qaeda.
- Little is known about al-Awlaki, though he is likely a distant relative of the late ideologue of AQAP, Anwar al-Awlaki, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2011. Al-Awlaki has masterminded many operations and appears to be positioning AQAP's media apparatus to overtake al-Qaeda core's own outlets in terms of reach and influence.

On July 29, the U.S. Department of State's Rewards for Justice (RFJ) program increased its offer for information leading to the identification or location of the leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Sa'ad bin Atef al-Awlaki. The new reward for information on him has reached \$10 million, surpassing the previous reward of \$6 million ([U.S. Department of State Rewards for Justice](#), July 29). Al-Awlaki is an effective leader of AQAP on account of his hybrid strategy of localized

and global jihad, which attempts to balance creating links and support in Yemen to further entrench al-Qaeda there, while strengthening his ties with AQ's central leadership and posing a continued risk to targets and adversaries outside Yemen.

Al-Awlaki's Enigmatic Emergence

On March 10, 2024, AQAP released a video from its official al-Malahem Media Agency featuring the voice of Khubayb al-Sudani (an alias of Ibrahim al-Qosi), a well-known Sudan-born member of AQAP's Shura Council. [1] Al-Sudani announced the death of the group's leader, Khaled al-Batarfi, and the selection of Sa'ad bin Atif al-Awlaki (alias Abu Al-Layth) as AQAP's new leader ([Al-Malahem Media](#), March 10, 2024). Very little is known about al-Awlaki, aside from being a veteran al-Qaeda member who trained in Afghanistan before returning to Yemen. He is a Yemeni citizen born in the town of al-Shu'bah in Wadi Yasbam in Shabwa governorate ([Al-Arabiya](#), March 11, 2024). As his surname indicates, he is descended from the al-Awlaki tribe, likely making him a distant relative of the late ideologue of AQAP, Anwar al-Awlaki, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2011.

The current AQAP leader al-Awlaki's exact date of birth is unknown, but the U.S. State Department estimates three possible dates: 1978, 1981, or 1983. He has long been a top leader in AQAP, influencing Sunni tribes in the southern Shabwa province to adopt AQAP ideology. Around 2014, he was promoted to being a member of AQAP's Shura Council, its premier governing body, and was appointed one of the organization's "military operations" decision-makers ([Mubasher al-Arab](#), July 5). As a result, he was targeted by a U.S. drone strike in his hometown of al-Shu'bah in March 2017. Al-Awlaki survived, although his brother was killed ([Al-Ain](#), July 29).

Al-Awlaki's Strategy and Media Presence

Unlike his predecessor Batarfi, al-Awlaki is an experienced and dynamic leader, having masterminded many AQAP operations ([Akhbar al-Aan](#), July 30). He is considered the architect of al-Qaeda's strategy, which chooses not to target the Houthis—instead exploiting them for arms smuggling between the coasts of Shabwa and Abyan in Yemen's south on the Gulf of Aden. Additionally, he is known within AQAP for his extreme obedience to the organization's leadership and hierarchy.

Al-Awlaki last appeared in an al-Malahem Media video on June 5. In the 34-minute video, he threatened attacks against the United States, Israel, and other Western countries, and called on all Muslims to join al-Qaeda and engage in jihad. The end of the video included excerpts from footage of various branches of al-Qaeda along with its affiliates and allies, including Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) in the Sahel, al-Shabaab in Somalia, al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and other organizations such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban ([Al-Malahem Media](#), June 5). This revealed how AQAP is maintaining a regional and global vision under al-Awlaki's leadership, and possibly attempting to position itself as the glue between various affiliates. Similarly, the ambitious messaging and recent videos of AQAP-affiliated *al-Malahem Media* could be evidence of AQAP attempting to position itself as al-Qaeda's new seat of propaganda—even replacing *as-Sahab*, the media outlet of al-Qaeda's central organization (located in Afghanistan and Pakistan) in prominence.

Conclusion

Despite counterterrorism pressure from the United States and paramilitary forces of the Emirati-trained Southern Transitional Council (STC), AQAP has been resilient and carried out 26 attacks in the first six months of 2025. [2] Counterterrorism operations, infighting, leadership issues,

and the presence of spies have nonetheless reduced AQAP's potential, forcing it to scale back its areas of operation, continuing with guerrilla tactics. Despite AQAP's difficulties, Yemen has continued to be plagued by a political environment characterized by political instability, weak state control, endemic corruption, marginalized regions, and growing poverty that favors al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

AQAP under al-Awlaki continues to exploit these fertile conditions and has not abandoned its global jihadist propaganda objectives. The group has shown great interest in events outside Yemen, such as the Gaza War, Syria, and throughout Africa, and has continued to issue threats against its enemies, particularly the United States and Israel. AQAP claims nearly four thousand individual members, both active fighters and noncombatant supporters, and operates mainly in the provinces of Hadhramaut, Shabwa, Ma'rib, Al-Bayda, and Abyan, with sleeper cells in Al-Mahra, Wadi Hadhramaut, Aden, and Lahj. [3]

Since his appointment as leader in March 2024, al-Awlaki has improved AQAP's capabilities, restructuring the group, improving the living conditions of his fighters, and limiting counter-terrorist forces' and rival groups' infiltration attempts. Many AQAP attacks in 2024 and the first six months of 2025 involved short-range armed drones, small arms, improvised explosive devices, and 12.7 mm anti-materiel sniper rifles.

On al-Awlaki's account, the Yemeni al-Qaeda affiliate has also reinforced its media and its ties with AQ's central leadership, which could help AQAP regain control of some of the provinces of Abyan and Shabwa in the medium to long term. Above all, the key question is whether AQAP's newest al-Awlaki will follow in his more famous namesake's footsteps of successfully inspiring and organizing attacks against the United States and its interests.

Daniele Garofalo is a researcher and analyst of jihadist terrorism. He is also involved in the study, research, and analysis of jihadist organizations' propaganda by monitoring jihadist media channels on the web, social networks, and messaging apps.

Notes:

[1] Al-Qosi is also on the U.S. Department of State's Rewards for Justice list with a reward of \$4 million. <https://rewardsforjustice.net/rewards/ibrahim-ahmed-mahmoud-al-qosi/>

[2] For more details, see "Six months of terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Analysis and statistics of AQAP attacks from 1 January to 30 June." 2025. <https://www.danielegarofalomonitoring.com/p/six-months-of-terrorist-attacks-by>

[3] According to the recent monitoring report by the United Nations Security Council, published on July 24, 2025.