



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

p.1

Brief: Benny Wenda: Papuan Independence Leader Struggles for International Support

Jacob Zenn

p.2

Asif Adnan: Urban, Young, and Digital Face of Islamist Extremism in Bangladesh

Iftekharul Bashar

p.4

Abdullah Öcalan: PKK Leader Key to Peace Process With Turkey

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

p.7

Abass Dembélé: Mali Arrests General Responsible for Combating Jihadists

Andrew McGregor

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Benny Wenda: Papuan Independence Leader Struggles for International Support

Jacob Zenn

Benny Wenda is a West Papuan activist and independence leader, and the most recognizable face of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP). The ULMWP was formed in 2014 from a coalition of pro-independence factions active in Indonesia's territory in western New Guinea, with the purpose of uniting the Papuan independence movement's disparate factions' political and military wings ([ABC News](#) [Australia], July 3, 2019). Although the group has seen significant internal division since its formation, Benny Wenda remains its best-known leader and main figurehead.

Indonesian authorities have attempted to implicate Wenda in violence in spite of his mainly political role. Indigenous Papuans are black Melanesians, physically distinctive from other Indonesians. In 2019, a series of escalations—students supportive of Papuan independence were believed to have damaged an Indonesian flag, allegedly leading to nationalist groups surrounding the building they were in and

Executive Summary

- Based in Oxford since receiving asylum in 2002, Wenda remains the most visible leader of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP), though the movement itself faces deep internal divisions.
- Indonesia has sought to tie Wenda to violence and placed him on an Interpol Red Notice, but he denies involvement. He continues to highlight the 1969 "Act of Free Choice" as illegitimate and campaigns internationally for a new referendum, while warning of genocide, deforestation, and demographic change in Papua.
- Despite honors abroad and a large independence petition, Wenda's campaign garners little international attention compared to other global conflicts. His leadership is also questioned by some Papuan factions, limiting both internal cohesion and external support for independence.

hurling racial slurs at them—provoked anti-racism riots that killed 17 students and one police officer ([BBC](#), August 22, 2019; [Al Jazeera](#), August 28, 2019). The Indonesian National Police's spokesman accused Wenda of proliferating "fake news," claiming that the Papuan leader fabricated and disseminated the story of the Papuan students' harassment that provoked the unrest in the first place ([ANTARA News](#), September 24, 2019).

In 2011, the Indonesian police placed a red notice on Wenda with INTERPOL. The charges related to Wenda's alleged involvement in attacking the Abepura Police Station in 2000, in which six police officers and civilians were killed ([BBC](#), November 25, 2011). Wenda, who denies the allegations, claims he was in the United Kingdom at that time, studying at Oxford; he was granted asylum in 2002. While based in Oxford, Wenda has derided the 1969 "Act of Free Choice" referendum that Indonesia used to legitimize its sovereignty over Papua as an "act of no choice." He argues that the Indonesian military hand-picked the 1,026 voters in the plebiscite's voting pool, who were also "surveyed under duress." Wenda alleges that these factors led the voters to unanimously vote for Indonesian annexation, rather than a genuine desire to join Indonesia ([New Naratif](#), May 19). Since 1969, the majority of the international community has recognized Papua as part of Indonesia, despite Wenda and his followers' claims that an independent West Papua should have succeeded the departure of Dutch colonialists in 1969.

In Oxford, Wenda received the honorary Freedom of the City award in 2019 ([YouTube/Oxford City Council](#), July 17, 2019). In traditional Papuan attire, he presented a petition he provided to the Chairperson of the Human Rights Council of the United Nations to hold another Papuan independence referendum that gained 1.8 million signatures, some 72 percent of the territory's overall population ([Free West Papua Campaign](#), January 29, 2019).

Perhaps the greatest challenge Wenda faces is the obscurity and perceived irrelevance of the Papuan cause to the international community. While Wenda has warned of a "genocide" in Papua for years and some international observers support this claim, West Papua receives virtually no international coverage. Wenda addressed this disparity in a statement, decrying the Indonesian government for "claiming to oppose genocide in Gaza while committing their own genocide in West Papua" ([Indigenous Peoples' Major Group for Sustainable Development](#), accessed September 8; [United Liberation Movement for West Papua](#), November 17, 2023).

Wenda also warns that Indonesia's current President Prabowo's visits to Papua have coincided with projects aimed at the exploitation of the region's resources. These include deforestation projects and a new transmigration plan of non-indigenous Papuans to Papua ([Roya News](#), March 11). Despite his ardent advocacy for independence, other Papuan independence leaders question the legitimacy of Wenda's initiatives, such as his forming an "interim government" in 2020 ([Jubi Papua](#), November 30, 2023). Wenda's attempts to raise Papuan issues to global attention have included allegations that Indonesian forces used chemical weapons against Papuans in 2021 ([Asia Pacific Report](#), January 31). Still, the lack of internal and external support remains a challenge Wenda must overcome for any future efforts toward West Papuan independence to succeed.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Militant Leadership Monitor.

Asif Adnan: Urban, Young, and Digital Face of Islamist Extremism in Bangladesh

Iftekharul Bashar

Executive Summary

- Asif Adnan, son of a High Court judge and former musician, became radicalized after the 2013 Shapla Square movement and was arrested in 2014 for ties to Ansarullah Bangla Team and al-Qaeda networks, though quickly released on bail.
- Since then, he has reinvented himself as an Islamist author and translator, framing extremist discourse in intellectual terms that resonate with Bangladesh's urban, educated youth.
- Adnan has built a large online platform—over 300,000 Facebook followers plus YouTube, TikTok, and blogs—using sophisticated digital outreach rarely seen in Bangladeshi jihadist circles.
- His influence has expanded since the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government; his role in a foiled July 2025 plot against the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka underscores the regional risks posed by his blend of academic credibility, digital charisma, and global jihadist messaging.

Traditional religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh is now making use of digital technology for dissemination, spearheaded by a new generation of urban and tech-savvy extremists with mainstream academic backgrounds. This evolution presents a significant hurdle for counter-extremism efforts in the country ([S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies](#), June 4). Within this normalized

radical milieu, Asif Adnan (also known as Shuvo and Julkarnain) has emerged as a prominent ideologue, evolving from a musician to a radical preacher, activist, and author. Adnan and other new actors leverage their educational credentials and digital expertise to portray violent ideologies as intellectually and morally sound so that they may resonate with Bangladesh's younger, urban, and educated demographic. The trend has intensified since the August 2024 regime change in Dhaka, which allowed previously isolated extremist groups to forge alliances on common platforms like SEAN Publication. [1] The recent political shifts have created a more permissive environment for radical discourses, enabling figures like Adnan to gain unprecedented traction among a susceptible populace. Unlike similar individuals who focus solely on Bangladesh, Adnan appears to operate as a jihadist strategist with a global agenda.

From Mainstream Academia to Radical Preacher

Asif Adnan's background is notably different from that of many traditional Islamist figures in Bangladesh. The son of a former High Court judge, Abdus Salam Mamun, Adnan pursued his education at Bangladesh's prestigious mainstream institutions, including St. Joseph School, Notre Dame College, and the University of Dhaka, where he earned a master's degree in Economics. Adnan's family highlighted Adnan's "brilliant academic and cultural records" and first-class degree in economics in a bail application (blabbermouth.net, October 3, 2014).

Prior to his radicalization, Adnan was involved in music as a guitarist and singer in a death-metal band called Jahiliyyah (Arabic: جاهلية, referring to the pre-Islamic "Age of Ignorance" and idolatry). Formed in 2010, Adnan previously maintained that his passion for metal music was fully compatible with his Islamic faith. "I'm a Muslim and I follow the rules of my religion, but that doesn't stop me from living with a

passion for metal, and keep an open mind,” he remarked in response to questions about how his faith and his love of death metal could coexist in a 2014 interview ([Roads and Kingdoms](#), April 8, 2014).

Adnan's transformation began in the aftermath of the 2013 Shapla Square movement. The movement was led by Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh, a radical Islamist platform demanding the enactment of blasphemy laws ([Muslim Bangla](#), June 1, 2024). This period of heightened tension between Islamists and secularists in Bangladesh, coupled with the escalating crises in Syria and Iraq, appears to have served as a catalyst for Adnan's radicalization. In 2013, Adnan was one of the country's prominent voices against atheism at a time when atheist bloggers, writers, and activists were being hacked to death by the members of Ansar al-Islam, the Bangladeshi wing of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), December 9, 2017).

Extremist Escalation

Adnan's involvement in extremist activities led to his arrest, together with his friend, Fazle Elahi Tanzil, a former senior bureaucrat's son, on September 24, 2014, by the Bangladesh Police's Detective Branch (DB). Both were allegedly followers of Ansarullah Bangla Team's spiritual leader Jasimuddin Rahmani, and inspired by then-al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri ([Deutsche Welle](#), October 17, 2022). Adnan allegedly plotted subversive activities, hoping to overthrow the Bangladeshi government. The DB seized a computer, three cell phones, two thumb drives, and three CDs from the suspects during the arrest.

DB officials stated they retrieved texts Asif and Tanzil had exchanged. The duo sent messages to different cell phone numbers, encouraging others to join in their jihad. For example, Adnan wrote in a text message to Tanzil: “I just want to be in the land of jihad. Among the mujahideen. Living a life only for Allah” ([The Daily Star](#)

[Bangladesh], December 24, 2014). Investigations revealed his intentions to join an al-Qaeda-affiliated network in Bangladesh (the Ansarullah Bangla Team being a part of this network) and/or travel to conflict zones in Syria and Myanmar and join al-Qaeda affiliates like AQIS or the al-Nusra Front in Syria. ([The Daily Star](#) [Bangladesh], September 25, 2014).

Crucially, Adnan was also in contact with Samiun Rahman, a 24-year-old British-Bangladeshi militant recruiter and London minicab driver who had returned from Syria and was subsequently arrested in Bangladesh ([Prothom Alo](#), September 29, 2014; [The Times](#) [United Kingdom], October 5, 2014). Rahman had met with Adnan and Tanzil multiple times before his arrest. Rahman was later released from jail, left Bangladesh, and was then arrested in India. Rahman's release on bail and the return of his passport sparked significant controversy in Bangladesh ([Dhaka Tribune](#), September 22, 2017; [Deutsche Welle](#), October 17, 2022).

In an interview, Adnan said that he was in prison for three months ([5Pillars](#), November 10, 2024). Despite the gravity of the charges against Adnan and his plans to engage in jihadist activities, he was granted bail by Bangladesh's High Court on December 23, 2014 ([Prothom Alo](#), December 23, 2014; [The Daily Star](#) [Bangladesh], December 24, 2014). Tanzil also secured bail and subsequently disappeared. The two's swift release and escape from proportionate legal consequences raise questions regarding potential familial, political, and legal influences surrounding their case. This points toward potential vulnerabilities within Bangladesh's justice system when addressing high-profile extremism.

Radical Authorship and Digital Influence

Following his release from jail, Adnan focused on writing and translating radical works. In 2019, he authored a widely discussed Bengali book, *Chintaporadh*

(Bangla: চিন্তাপরাধ, lit. "Thought Crime") and translated Islamist YouTuber Daniel Haqiqatjou's *The Modernist Menace to Islam* into Bengali, titled *Shongshoybadi* (Bangla: সংশয়বাদী, *The Skeptic*). These publications frame extremist viewpoints within a faux intellectual framework, targeting an educated audience.

Adnan's return to public prominence has been particularly notable since the fall of Sheikh Hasina's administration in August 2024. He uses digital platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, to spread his views. Adnan often comments on contentious global issues such as the Gaza conflict, as he advocates for an anti-secular stance and promotes jihadist narratives. His Facebook page, with over 308,000 followers, is a primary conduit for disseminating provocative extremist and anti-secular rhetoric. Adnan also operates a Bengali-language blog, *Chintaporadh*, where his radical essays and articles are published (chintaporadh.com, accessed September 12). Adnan's writing style is often complex, scholarly, and challenging for the average reader.

Beyond his direct platforms, Adnan's narratives are amplified through various Bengali-language extremist platforms, such as SEAN Publication, which hosts his public speeches on its YouTube channel. Viral TikTok clips, often shared by Adnan's followers, further expand his reach, particularly among younger audiences. His charisma and ability to attract a mainstream following—dominated by educated, urban youth beyond traditional *madrassa* [Arabic: مدرسة, Islamic seminary] networks—marks a departure from conventional extremist recruitment patterns in Bangladesh.

In a November 2024 lecture in Chittagong, Adnan explicitly called for the "Liberation of *al-Quds*" (Arabic: القدس, Jerusalem) through "revolutionary jihad and violent upheaval of the global order," dismissing peaceful negotiations as futile. He asserted that this "bloody and brutal" process must overthrow the current world order, which

he believes established Israel, and that freedom for "al-Quds" would not come through the United Nations, international law, or existing Muslim rulers. He stressed the necessity of "*ummah* (Arabic: أمة, global Muslim community]-centric" jihad, involving *qital* (Arabic: قتال, lit. "battling"), the establishment of Islamic shari'a in Muslim-majority countries, and replacing "tyrannical puppets with men of God"—a change he stated would "not come through ballot boxes" ([YouTube/SEAN Publication](#), November 21, 2024).

Adnan also discussed *tamkin* (Arabic: تثبيت, lit. "establishing, cementing" power), and advocated for seizing control of land, particularly the areas of Syria that border Israel, to build military bases for incremental liberation. He borrowed Maoist rhetoric, emphasizing that "political power comes through the barrel of a gun." Adnan's speeches portray the "enemy" as a multi-faceted entity comprising the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Israel, Arab rulers, and the United States, asserting that "al-Quds" cannot be freed within the United States's framework ([YouTube/SEAN Publication](#), November 21, 2024).

Conclusion

Asif Adnan represents a new form of extremism in Bangladesh, blending academic credibility with radical religious ideology and sophisticated digital outreach. Born into an affluent and educated family, he aims to appeal to educated, urban audiences in a fashion differing notably from traditional radicalization models, which were heavily based on personal networks, Islamic institutions, and recruitment from the community of existing conservatives. Adnan's pedigree allows him to float extremist discourse as acceptable cultural criticism, while his intellectual approach, international ties, and online persona make him a serious threat to monitor, as he accelerates "self-radicalization" among youth and aids terrorist recruitment among a segment of Bangladeshi society less susceptible—but also less inoculated—to extremism.

In July, Adnan was named as a key suspect in a foiled plot to attack the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka ([Bangla Outlook](#), August 25). The plot was only disrupted by Bangladeshi authorities after Washington provided intelligence detailing plans to kidnap and murder embassy staff. Asif Adnan was identified alongside several others, including key al-Qaeda-oriented militant leader and Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya (JAFHS) founder, Shamin Mahfuz, who was arrested in July by Bangladesh's Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU) for his suspected ties to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (for more on Shamin Mahfuz, see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), March 6). [2] Adnan was named in a case filed by the interrogation of another suspect, Md Foysal, who was arrested on July 2 and claimed that he, Adnan, and other individuals were in contact with the TTP ([The Daily Star](#) [Bangladesh], July 15).

In response to the allegations, Asif Adnan held a press conference at the Dhaka Press Club on July 17. He denied allegations and suggested that the charges against him were part of a "conspiracy to suppress Islamists" ([insaf24.com](#), July 17). Adnan urged "collective action" against what he described as a "shrinking public space for Islamic expression." Countrywide protests, including one in Dhaka where Adnan himself spoke, echoed his claims that these cases are "planned state drama" designed to suppress Islamists and diminish Islam's public presence in Bangladesh ([insaf24.com](#), July 18). Another rally on July 25 in Dhaka's commercial district was attended by extremist figures, including Jasim Uddin Rahmani, Mahmudul Hasan Gunobi, and Enayetullah Abbasi, among others ([insaf24.com](#), July 25).

Adnan's increasing visibility, including his online presence and lectures, combined with his skill in delivering a radical message, positions Adnan as a rising figure in South and Southeast Asia's Islamist scene. His PhD candidacy at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and frequent travel between Bangladesh and Malaysia also raise

concerns about his potential to facilitate extremist activities in the region, as does his ability to reach and help radicalize elements within Bangladesh's urban professional class who are not as closely monitored by the country's security services.

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Notes:

[1] Established in 2013, SEAN Publication produces books and organizes public events, among other activities intended to propagate radicalism, with the primary goal of engaging educated young audiences in *dawah* (Arabic: دعوة, lit "calling," Islamic proselytism or preaching) activities across various platforms.

[2] Shamin Mahfuz is a prominent Bangladeshi militant with a long history of involvement in various banned groups, including a key role in forming Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya, and he has been arrested for alleged ties to the TTP. He faces multiple charges for terrorism and related crimes.

Abdullah Öcalan: PKK Leader Key to Peace Process With Turkey

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

Executive Summary

- Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the PKK, has urged his organization to disarm and pursue a negotiated settlement with Türkiye. His role and personal status remain central sticking points.
- The “terror-free initiative,” promoted by Devlet Bahçeli and President Erdoğan—both longtime PKK opponents—has created an unexpected opening for talks.
- Significant obstacles remain, particularly the refusal of PKK affiliates in Syria (SDF), Iran (PJAK), and elsewhere to disarm, which threatens to derail the process.

Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), has been imprisoned on Türkiye’s İmralı Island since his 1999 arrest in Kenya and subsequent deportation. After the failure of the PKK–Turkish peace process in 2015, the Turkish state imposed restrictions on his contact with the outside world. From 2020, Öcalan had no contact with the outside world until October 23, 2024, when he met his family and called for peace ([Medya News](#), October 24, 2024).

The end of Öcalan’s isolation was made possible by an unlikely ally: Devlet Bahçeli. Bahçeli is the leader of Türkiye’s far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and is a former leader of the party’s youth wing, the Grey Wolves. Bahçeli has called for Öcalan’s execution as well as banning legal Kurdish political parties. In October, to the surprise of many, Bahçeli suggested Öcalan address parliament—on the condition he

called for the disarmament of the PKK ([Medya News](#), October 22, 2024). He even suggested Öcalan be released through the European Court of Human Rights’s “Right to Hope” legal mechanism ([BIAnet](#), October 26, 2024; [Daily Sabah](#), January 14). The move appears to be a part of Turkish President Recep Erdoğan’s ambitions to remain in power by gaining Kurdish support, bolstering his position in Türkiye’s 2028 elections ([Voice of America](#), March 4).

Bahçeli’s initiative has led to a peace process called the “terror-free initiative” by the Turkish state ([Daily Sabah](#), January 14). This term is rejected by the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), which frames it as a “peace and reconciliation” initiative ([Kurdistan 24](#), July 15).

Öcalan’s Messaging

On February 27, Abdullah Öcalan called on “all groups” to lay down their arms and for the PKK to dissolve itself ([BIAnet](#), February 27). In response, the PKK held its 12th Congress in May, in which the group emphasized both that it would follow the directives of Öcalan, but also that there was a need for solid legal guarantees from Ankara. Moreover, the PKK expressed that the Turkish parliament, with the participation of all political parties, needed to be involved in the process and help establish a committee to oversee it ([BIAnet](#), May 13). Likewise, the PKK renewed its calls for Öcalan’s release ([BIAnet](#), May 14).

In July, Öcalan released his first video message in 26 years. The video came out ahead of a PKK disarmament ceremony, which took place in Sulaimani (Sulaymaniyah), Iraqi Kurdistan, on July 11. Öcalan asserted that:

The PKK movement and its ‘National Liberation Strategy’ which emerged as a reaction to the denial of the existence [of the Kurds]

and thus aimed at setting up a separate state has been dissolved. The existence [of the Kurds] has been recognized; therefore, the basic aim has been achieved ([BIAnet](#), July 9).

After the ceremony, a parliamentary commission was formed, as per the PKK's demands ([Rudaw](#), July 25).

Complications and Interpretations

Despite apparent progress, complications are already arising in the new peace process. Turkish officials have ruled out Öcalan's potential participation in the "right to hope" program, meaning he will face prosecution for the PKK's past militancy ([Medya News](#), March 18). In his video, Öcalan warned against an illogical "you first, then me" approach toward disarmament by the PKK ([BIAnet](#), July 9). His statements may have been aimed at reducing tensions, but his life sentence remains a point of contention between Ankara and the PKK.

In addition, the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria in December 2024 (in the middle of the Türkiye-PKK negotiations) introduced further complications. PKK-affiliated groups, such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), have vowed not to disarm for fear of Islamist violence—despite Öcalan's calls for them to disarm in February ([Reuters](#), February 27; [Rudaw](#), [May 20](#), [July 11](#)). Öcalan's brother also claimed that Öcalan insisted that the Kurds in Syria should never lay down their arms, and labeled the new Syrian Interim President, Ahmed al-Sharaa, as "the head of [Islamic State in Iraq and Syria]" ([Serbestiyet](#), July 14). This all came amid negotiations and increasing tensions between the SDF and Damascus over the SDF's integration into the new Syrian Army. Türkiye has called for the disarmament of the SDF as a direct PKK affiliate ([Rudaw](#), July 26). The pro-Kurdish DEM Party's reaction after Öcalan's

brother's statement underscored the risk of letting the narrative fall into the hands of individuals who do not officially represent the movement. Potential future clashes between the SDF and Damascus could also undermine the peace process in Türkiye.

Conclusion

The peace process has further cemented Öcalan's central role as the cornerstone of Turkish-PKK relations, regardless of the final result. Any step made by the PKK and the Turkish state as a part of the peace process depends on Öcalan's views and statements. Conversely, if the peace process fails, Öcalan could face isolation again, resulting in renewed fighting between the PKK and the Turkish Armed Forces, especially in Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as tension between the Turkish government and the SDF, which complicates the former's relationship with Syria.

Wladimir van Wilgenburg is a reporter and analyst. He has covered the war against the Islamic State in northern Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan and other subjects for international media and has conducted research for several think tanks.

Abass Dembélé: Mali Arrests General Responsible for Combating Jihadists

Andrew McGregor

Executive Summary

- The arrest of Mali's General Abass Dembélé appears to be part of a purge of the nation's civil and military leadership by General Assimi Goïta, who took power in a 2021 coup d'état. Dembélé has been an unusually competent commander and a key figure in Mali's counterinsurgency efforts.
- Discontent is growing in Mali's military leadership over the role of unaccountable Russian military contractors. Dembélé's criticism makes him a target for pro-Russian stakeholders in the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa) and government. One of the nation's most popular and patriotic soldiers, Dembélé is now accused of working with various hostile factions (French operatives, separatists, jihadists).

The August arrest of Malian General Abass Dembélé by the military regime of General Assimi Goïta represents a concerning development for the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa) in their multi-front struggle against insurgents. Factional struggles within the FAMa are a major factor in its operational weakness, and Dembélé's arrest comes along with the indefinite detention of some of Mali's most accomplished military leaders on charges of conspiracy to overthrow the Goïta regime.

General Dembélé is a Western-trained counterterrorism specialist. He is one of Mali's leading commanders in its deadly 14-year battle against forces of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and Tuareg separatists.

Dembélé is the son of Colonel Koké Dembélé (d. 2013), a leading member of the National Order of Mali, the country's highest honor. The elder Dembélé was a commander of the FAMa from 1982 to 1986 during the presidency of General Moussa Traoré (1968–1991) ([Tama Media](#), August 19). Unlike most of his African-trained comrades in Mali's officer corps, the younger Abass Dembélé received military training in France and the United States, specializing in counterterrorism ([L'Express](#), February 20, 2013). As a major in 2012, he was commander of the 61st Infantry Regiment at Sévaré (in central Mali) at the time of the Islamist takeover of northern Mali ([Exclusif.net](#) [Dakar], August 15; [Tama Media](#), August 19). The Islamist occupation of the country's north followed the eruption of an insurgency across northern Mali in January 2012. This led to a coup d'état two months later and two major French military operations—Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane—between December 2012 and November 2022.

2012 Coup

Factional struggles within the Forces Armées Maliennes (FAMa) are a major factor in its operational weakness. In March 2012, the army's pro-junta "Green Berets" overthrew the democratically elected Ahmadou Toumani Touré (2002–2012), a former "Red Beret" (member of the 33rd Paratroop Regiment). The country's Red Berets rescued the president and mounted a failed but bloody counter-coup, followed by a Green Beret-led purge and dispersal of those paratroopers allowed to continue in service. The remains of some 30 Red Berets were later found on the grounds of the Kati military base outside Bamako after having been tortured and murdered by their military rivals (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), February 22, 2013).

Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo (of the Sénoufo people), an American-trained "Green Beret" regular officer, led the March 2012 military coup against Touré (d. 2020). Though the putschists claimed their

coup was in response to Touré's military failures in the north, all three regional capitals in northern Mali—Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu—were lost within days of Sanogo's takeover, as insurgents took advantage of the army's disarray.

Commando Leader

After the collapse of the FAMa under Tuareg and Islamist assaults in early 2012, it became clear that urgent measures were required to prevent the spread of the insurgency into heavily populated central and southern Mali. The insurgents were well-armed with Libyan weapons that had flowed south after the downfall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011. In September 2012, Colonel-Major Didier Dacko (later Malian chief of staff and commander of the G5 Sahel Joint Force) created the *Groupe Commando Volontaire* (GCV), recruited from the army, air force, military engineers, and the *Garde Nationale* (the "Brown Berets") ([L'Essor](#) [Bamako], February 28, 2013). Command was given to Dembélé, a former intelligence colleague of Dacko's, who described the new formation as "a 100% Malian product" ([L'Express](#), February 23, 2013). With the army shattered by repeated defeats at the hands of jihadists and divided into loyalists and putschists by the 2012 coup, Dacko and Dembélé recruited this new force from soldiers still eager to take the fight to the Islamists.

GCV training took place at an isolated location, rather than the Sévaré military base. Mopti Region in central Mali was chosen in order to prevent recruits from being "contaminated" by the rampant corruption and defeatism present in the FAMa. Training focused on creating an aggressive and disciplined attitude among the troops. Dembélé said of the company's training regimen:

Here, you arrive on time.
Here too, you respect your
leader. It's not a question of
equipment, but of self-
sacrifice. I've made it a

credo... It's the only
company you can ask to be
on site, in the middle of the
night, in fifteen minutes.
Everywhere else, you'll
always have someone
looking for their shoes,
whose socks aren't dry,
who's at their aunt's
funeral... ([L'Express](#),
February 20, 2013).

Unlike the rest of the army, morale was high in Dembélé's GCV. One French legionnaire observed that in the commandos' eagerness to come to blows with the jihadists, they often entered the fight without helmets or bulletproof vests ([L'Essor](#) [Bamako], February 28, 2013). Unfortunately, the creation of a competent elite unit created further friction within Mali's regular forces.

The Battle of Konna

Dembélé made a name for himself at the Battle of Konna. Konna is a town in Mali's central Mopti Region, which serves as a buffer between the extremely arid, rural, and insurgency-racked north and Mali's population centers (including the capital, Bamako, in the south). In Konna in 2013, the FAMa and jihadist commander Iyad Ag Ghaly came to blows in a decisive battle to prevent the passage of jihadist forces into the south. Leading elements of Ag Ghaly's Islamist Ansar al-Dine movement, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the *Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJWA) met government forces outside of Konna on January 7, 2013, expecting an easy rout of FAMa troops based on their previous encounters (for more on Iyad Ag Ghaly, see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), February 29, 2012).

Stiff resistance led by Colonel-Major Didier Dacko surprised the jihadists, who called for reinforcements. Malian Special Forces and *Garde Nationale* units held up the jihadists for 48 hours in one of the conflict's most important engagements. Playing a

vital role in the battle as commander was Dembélé, who stood firm with his commandos despite being wounded by shrapnel on the second day of the battle ([L'Aube](#) [Bamako], January 28, 2013; [Jeune Afrique](#), January 30, 2014).

With the help of French air support, Konna was back under full government control by January 18, 2013. In the months following the battle, Dembélé became an inspiration in the dispirited army for standing fast in battle despite his wounds ([Tama Media](#), August 19).

Arrest of Amadou Sanogo

After the return of civilian rule with the election of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in September 2013, Sanogo (the Malian Green Beret leader of the anti-Touré coup) was charged with the torture and murder of 30 Red Berets at the Kati military base. Sanogo's own Green Berets mutinied at Kati that month over the cancellation of promised promotions, leading to the brutal intervention of Malian Special Forces. Five of the mutineers were later found bound and buried alongside the heads of five crocodiles (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), June 13, 2014).

Much of the chaos in the army was blamed on Sanogo, who was still trying to exert influence in Mali's political realm even after the transition to civilian rule. Then-Lieutenant Colonel Dembélé led the team that arrested Sanogo on November 27, 2013. This occurred after Sanogo refused to respond to a summons issued by a judge investigating his role in various abuses of power ([AFP/Reuters](#), November 27, 2013).

The arrest was a demonstration of Dembélé's loyalty to civilian rule and was followed by a series of appointments and decorations for him, including membership in the National Order of Mali in February 2014. Further military training in France led to his graduation from the École de Guerre in late 2015. Dembélé then became director of the National Staff College in Koulikoro before his appointment on

September 17, 2017, as commander of Mali's 5th military region (Timbuktu) ([Studio Tamani](#), September 19, 2017; [Tama Media](#), August 19). In January 2020, he joined the team of the High Representative of the Head of State for Central Mali, led by former President Dioncounda Traoré, with the mission of contributing to the pacification of a region plagued by violence ([Exclusif.net](#) [Dakar], August 15).

Governor of Mopti

In August 2020, Mali suffered another coup, ousting President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and replacing him with military rule once again. Among the insurrectionists was Colonel Assimi Goïta. Displeased with the government after a transition to civilian rule, the colonel led a second coup in May 2021, installing himself as president and promoting himself to *Général d'Armée* (French: General of the Army, the highest rank in the FAMa) in October 2024. Goïta and the new junta sailed past the promised date of a return to civilian rule in March 2024 before dissolving all political parties in May 2025. The self-appointed general was granted an additional five years of power by his cronies, renewable "as many times as necessary."

In the meantime, the newly promoted Colonel-Major Dembélé was appointed governor of Mopti Region in December 2020. All went well at first, but shortages of water and power that saw electricity available for only two to three hours a day prompted large public protests against the governor's rule in June 2022. Repressive measures failed to quell discontent, and Dembélé was eventually forced to flee Mopti, although he continued to serve as its governor ([Nouvel Horizon](#) [Bamako], June 20, 2022).

In June 2024, Dembélé was promoted to Brigadier General. His reputation was enhanced through his skillful use of social media and humanitarian gestures, though in Mopti, he was accused of being an "absentee governor" ([RFI](#), August 10;

[Medium.com](#) [Lagos], August 16; [L'Essor](#) [Bamako], August 19). Ultimately, Dembélé was dismissed as governor in May after demanding an investigation of charges that the FAMA and a Dozo tribal militia massacred 23 Fulani cattlemen in Diafarabé (Mopti Region) on May 12. This was believed to have been driven by a desire to avenge a March 27 ambush of FAMA and Dozo fighters by jihadists thought to include members of the largely Fulani Katiba al-Macina group, allied to al-Qaeda ([Al Jazeera](#), August 15).

Dembélé's Arrest

In a development that shocked Mali, Dembélé was arrested at the Kati military base on August 10. Three other officers were arrested at the same time, including Air Force Brigadier Nema Sagara (of the Dogon ethnic group), Colonel Baba Dembélé, and military cardiologist Suleiman Diop ([TV5Monde](#), August 16). Sagara, a rare woman in Mali's senior officer staff, played a leading role in the fight against terrorists and rebels, especially in the retaking of northern Mali in 2013. She is also the daughter of Chief Warrant Officer Mérépein Joseph Sagara (d. 2025), who served in French colonial forces in Algeria and Indochina ([Tama Media](#), August 19). Regime-friendly media claimed after the arrests that Dembélé's "moment of glory" at Konna was manufactured "by media outlets under the orders of the new occupier [i.e., France], with orders to create a 'hero'" ([L'Essor](#) [Bamako], August 19).

The arrests that began on August 10 continued for several days. The minister of security, General Daoud Aly Mohammedine, took to TV to announce the arrest of "marginal elements of the Malian Armed Forces" who aimed to destabilize the republic "with the help of foreign states" (i.e., France) ([RFI](#), August 15). At least 55 soldiers were arrested, with the search continuing for further accomplices ([Al Jazeera](#), August 15; [Jeune Afrique/AFP](#), August 15; [IOL](#) [Cape Town], August 15). Many of those detained were from the

Garde Nationale. A good number of those arrested are believed to be close to Defense Minister General Sadio Camara, the first commander of the *Garde Nationale* ([Jeune Afrique/AFP](#), August 15). Also arrested were members of regular FAMA units and the air force ([TV5monde](#), August 12). Parallel to the military arrests, former prime minister Choguel Kokalla Maïga (in office from 2021 until 2024) and several others were detained as part of investigations into corruption.

Among those arrested was Yan Christian Bernard Vézilier, identified by security officials as a French spy working for the French General Directorate for External Security (DGSE). Vézilier was accused of mobilizing individuals dedicated to overthrowing official institutions and undermining Mali's national stability and security ([Bamada.net](#), August 15). His detention is complicated by the fact that he enjoys diplomatic immunity ([Nouvel Horizon](#) [Bamako], August 26).

The Russian Element

Russian troops, first in the form of Wagner Group contractors and now as part of the Russian Defense Ministry's Africa Corps, have played an increasingly important military role in Mali since the installation of General Assimi Goïta as Mali's ruler in 2021. Russian independence in operational decision-making and its access to the FAMA's arms and equipment have helped create dissent in Mali's officer corps. There has been growing friction within the FAMA provoked by the domineering attitude of Russian military contractors ([Jeune Afrique/AFP](#), August 15). Goïta claimed his crackdown was a response to a meeting held at Kati military base among leading officers, including Dembélé, to discuss grievances related to these and other issues that grew into a larger conspiracy ([Reuters](#), August 27). Both the Russians and FAMA personnel are regularly accused of large-scale atrocities against the civilian population in the course of counter-terrorism campaigns ([Human Rights Watch](#), July 22).

When Dembélé and Sagara complained of the lack of recognition given to Malian troops who fell in the fighting against jihadists, Goïta and his intelligence chief, General Modibo Koné, appear to have acted pre-emptively to prevent a coup. Some Malian media accused Dembélé of having close ties to Tuareg separatists and Islamist terrorists ([L'Essor](#) [Bamako], August 19; [Tama Media](#), August 19). Many of the *Garde Nationale* officers arrested are said to be close to Defense Minister General Sadio Camara, generally regarded as the number-two man in the regime and the prime mover behind Mali's alignment with Russia ([Reuters](#), August 27). As previously mentioned, Camara came from the *Garde Nationale* and maintains support there, which helps explain the disproportionate arrests of *Garde Nationale* members in Goïta's arrests. Though Dembélé and some other detainees operate within Camara's orbit, the defense minister has so far avoided arrest—even representing Mali in joint meetings in Moscow between defense ministers of the AES (*Alliance des États du Sahel*, which includes Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso) and their Russian counterpart Andrey Belousov in mid-August ([Bamada.net](#), August 15). The meeting was also attended by Russian deputy defense minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, commander of Russia's Africa Corps (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), April 18).

During the summit, which coincided with the 80th anniversary of the Soviet Union's defeat of Nazi Germany, Camara praised Soviet sacrifice and expressed his support of Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine ([APA News](#), August 14). Perhaps because of his close ties to the Russians, some sources in Mali suggest that instead of an immediate arrest, Camara will be the focus of a "methodical neutralization operation" by Goïta's security apparatus ([FinancialAfrik](#), August 14).

Conclusion

Dembélé is popular with his troops, so the decision to arrest him cannot have been made lightly. On the contrary, his popularity may have contributed to his arrest, especially if he was no longer fully supportive of the continued deployment of Russia's Africa Corps within Mali. Whether through a peremptory purge or the elimination of a conspiracy, the arrest of several of the FAMA's most capable and popular officers can only create further dissent in a demoralized and ineffective army that has already been forced to play a support role for Russian mercenaries who operate outside of the formal command structure.

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