



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

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CAPTAIN HASSAN IBRAHIM: DEFACTO AMBASSADOR FOR SYRIA'S SOUTHERN FRONT

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A coalition of moderate armed opposition groups in southern Syria, primarily organized within al-Jabhat al-Janoobiyya (Southern Front), are confronting the Islamic State affiliate Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk in the southwestern area of Dara'a governorate in the Syrian-Israeli and Syrian-Jordanian border region ([YouTube](#), April 10; [YouTube](#), April 10; [YouTube](#), April 10). One of the most powerful Southern Front-affiliated armed opposition groups currently contesting the Islamic State in southern Syria is Jabhat Thuwar Sooria (Syrian Revolutionaries Front), under the command of Captain Hassan Ibrahim (a.k.a. Abu Usama al-Julani).

Capt. Ibrahim, 40, is the General Coordinator of the Southern Front and is one of the most senior members of the armed opposition delegation within the Higher Negotiations Committee (Viber Interview, April 27, March 20; [Zaman al-Wasl](#) [Geneva], April 15; [YouTube](#), March 15; [Sooria Mubashar](#) [al-Quneitra],

December 27, 2015; [YouTube](#), May 15, 2015). He is also the ranking representative for the Southern Front in the diplomatic process (Viber Interview, April 27, March 20; [Sooria Mubashar](#) [al-Quneitra], December 27, 2015; [All4Syria](#) [Dara'a], December 15, 2015). Capt. Ibrahim is a high-value target for the al-Assad government and its allies; he has survived at least one assassination attempt targeting him in a May 2015 airstrike carried out by the Syrian Arab Army Air Force and has been declared dead twice—both in May and December 2015—by the al-Assad government (Viber Interview, April 27, March 20; [Sooria Mubashar](#) [al-Quneitra], December 27, 2015; [Siraj Press](#) [al-Quneitra], May 10, 2015; [Orient News](#) [Dubai], March 21, 2015).

Born in Damascus, Capt. Ibrahim's family is originally from the southwestern Syrian governorate of al-Quneitra that borders the Golan Heights, which is also the area where the Syrian Revolutionaries Front maintains its center of gravity. He is also a member of al-Buhatira, part of the larger trans-national al-Ta'ie confederation, and one of the most powerful Sunni Arab tribes in al-Quneitra governorate with a tribal network in southwestern Rif

Damascus governorate and in the northwestern areas of Dara'a governorate that border al-Quneitra (Viber Interview, April 27, March 20). Under his command, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front works closely with a range of civil society actors and provides support for civilian activities in the areas of its control inside al-Quneitra, including with several of the most prominent tribes in the governorate, including al-Na'im, al-Buhatira, and al-Zou'bi (Viber Interview, April 27, March 20; [YouTube](#), December 10, 2015; [YouTube](#), August 12, 2015; [YouTube](#), January 7, 2015; [YouTube](#), December 23, 2014).

Capt. Ibrahim defected from the Syrian Arab Army in November 2011, stating that he defected because he was sympathetic to the goals of the Syrian protest movement and as a result of seeing firsthand the brutality of al-Assad government security forces against civilian protesters (Viber Interview, April 27, March 20). Following his defection, he established himself in Syria's northwestern Idlib governorate, in the governorate's southwestern Jabal al-Zawiya district, which by early 2012 had become a major center of armed opposition activity (Viber Interview, April 27, March 20). Soon after his arrival in Idlib, Capt. Ibrahim joined Katiba Shuhada Jabal al-Zawiya (Jabal al-Zawiya Martyrs' Brigade), which was led by Jamal Maarouf, one of the most prominent Syrian armed opposition commanders in the entire country, and which later became the foundational group within the larger Jabal al-Zawiya coalition Alwiya Shuhada Sooria (Syrian Martyrs Brigades). While in Jabal al-Zawiya, in September 2012, he became a member of Free Syrian Army's General Command Council, which was an early attempt by the armed opposition to build a more coherent and effective national command structure for rebel forces (Viber Interview, April 27, March 20; [Al-Jazeera \[Doha\]](#), September 28, 2012).

Capt. Ibrahim would later become the general commander of the Alwiya Afhad al-Rasul (Descendants of the Prophet), which during the 2012-2013 time period was the one of the most prominent armed opposition coalition "brands" that had constituent militias located throughout Syria. The Syrian Martyrs Brigade was a founding organization within the Descendants of the Prophet coalition (Viber Interview, April 27, March 20; see [MLM Briefs](#), February 28, 2015). The Syrian Martyrs Brigade became the foundational organization within the local Syrian Revolutionaries Front coalition, whose northern branch remained under Jamal Maarouf's command.

Capt. Ibrahim traveled frequently to southern Syria, particularly to al-Quneitra where he had extensive familial ties, and helped establish the Syrian Revolutionaries Front's southern branch, which survived the defeat of the Syrian Revolutionaries Front's northern branch in a conflict with Jabhat al-Nusra in Jabal al-Zawiya in November 2014 (Viber Interview, April 27, March 20; see [MLM Briefs](#), 2015). Capt. Ibrahim has led the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, which he states has over 7,000 fighters, into several armed opposition coalitions in southern Syria, all of which have been part of the Southern Front, particularly al-Jaysh al-Awwal (First Army), in which he served as a spokesperson and commanding officer (Viber Interview, April 27, March 20; [YouTube](#), May 15, 2015; [YouTube](#), January 2, 2015).

In his capacity as a de facto ambassador for the Southern Front to the international community, Capt. Ibrahim has also sought to advocate for the role of the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, and the Southern Front coalition broadly, as key partners in the campaign to prevent the spread of IS in Syria (Viber Interview, April 27, March 20). He has been particularly concerned with communicating the role of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) organized,

predominately Shi'a militias including Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iraqi and Afghani militias supporting the SAA in the battle for the control of strategic al-Quneitra governorate (Viber Interview, April 27, March 20; Zaman al-Wasl [Geneva], April 15).

Due to his long experience as a leader within the moderate Syrian armed opposition movement, in both northern and southern Syria, his ranking position within the Southern Front, and his prominent role in the diplomatic process, Capt. Ibrahim is one of the most important Syrian moderate armed opposition leaders remaining in the conflict. His position within moderate armed opposition will be particularly important as a coordinator of moderate rebel military efforts against ideological extremist actors, including the Islamic State, within the armed opposition. Should he survive, Capt. Ibrahim, as one of the most consequential leaders within the Southern Front, also could be a major leader in a post-conflict transitional period, as opposition-controlled areas, such as in the south, will require effective civil-military structures to promote inclusive, non-sectarian, non-ideological extremist governance.

[1] Author's Viber interviews with Captain Hassan Ibrahim on April 27, 2016 and March 20, 2016.

CAPTAIN HASSAN HAJ ALI: SYRIAN COMMANDER OF THE US-VETTED MOUNTAIN HAWKS BRIGADE

Nicholas A. Heras

One of the most prominent, U.S.-vetted Syrian armed opposition groups that currently fights against the al-Assad government and its allies, as well as against the Islamic State (IS), is Liwa Suqur al-Jabal (Mountain Hawks Brigade), an organization with over 2,500 fighters spread in northwestern Syria's Idlib, Latakia, and Aleppo governorates (Viber Interview, April 28; Twitter; Al-Hayat, February 26; Revolutionary Forces of Syria Media Office, December 24, 2015). [1] Currently, the Mountain Hawks Brigade is one of the major constituent armed opposition groups in a nascent, primarily U.S.-backed Syrian rebel campaign against IS in areas northeast of Aleppo (Viber Interview, April 28; Twitter). The commander of the Mountain Hawks Brigade is Captain Hassan Haj Ali, 36, who is one of the most important moderate armed opposition leaders in northern Syria (Al-Safir [Beirut], February 2, 2016; Shaam [Damascus], November 26, 2015).

Captain Haj Ali is likely one of the original "Trusted Commanders," which are Syrian rebel leaders that media reports indicate have been vetted by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (for the potential role of the C.I.A. in vetting and facilitating U.S. military assistance and training, see: Wall Street Journal, January 26, 2015; PBS Frontline, May 27, 2014). He states that he and his organization are seeking a post-conflict Syria where all Syrians have equal rights and duties on the basis of citizenship and law (Viber Interview, April 28). Captain Haj Ali further states that Mountain Hawk Brigade fighters have been provided with U.S. military training in Qatar and Saudi Arabia (on receiving U.S. military assistance and training in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Viber Interview, April 28). This U.S.-

approved military assistance includes BGM-71 TOW anti-tank missiles, which have been particularly effective against the al-Assad government's mechanized forces. The Mountain Hawks Brigade has received a steady supply of the anti-tank missiles—and the permission to fire them—since 2014 (Viber Interview, April 28; [Twitter](#); [YouTube](#); [YouTube](#)).

The Mountain Hawks Brigade was one of the first targets of the Russian Aerospace Forces when Russia's military intervention in Syria began in September 2015, including targeting the group's bases and weapons storehouses ([Reuters](#), December 15, 2015; [Reuters](#), October 24, 2015; [YouTube](#), October 7, 2015; [Al-Araby Al-Jadid](#), October 7, 2015; [Halab Today \[Aleppo\]](#), October 1, 2015; [Radio Al-Kul \[Aleppo\]](#), October 1). Over the course of the fall of 2015, the Mountain Hawks Brigade has repeatedly and successfully deployed TOW missiles against al-Assad government armor, drawing regional and international media attention ([Twitter](#), December 1; [The Daily Beast](#), October 24, 2015; [Reuters](#), October 19, 2015; [Los Angeles Times](#), October 12, 2015). This attention on the Mountain Hawks Brigade has catapulted Captain Haj Ali into the role of a front-line spokesman for the U.S.-supported armed opposition in Syria.

A native of Idlib, he defected from the Syrian Arab Army in May 2012. Following his defection, Captain Haj Ali traveled to the northern Aleppo countryside where he joined the Free Syrian Army's growing armed opposition campaign outside of the city of Aleppo (Viber Interview, April 28). In September 2012, Captain Haj Ali traveled to the Jabal al-Zawiya district of Idlib, where he helped form Liwa Suqur Jabal al-Zawiya (Hawks of the Zawiya Mountain Brigade), which is the same organization as the Mountain Hawks Brigade that he currently leads (Viber Interview, April 28). He led the Hawks of the Zawiya Mountain

Brigade into association with Alwiya Afhaad al-Rasul (Descendants of the Prophet Brigades), a national armed opposition "brand" that was powerful during the 2012-2013 time period ([YouTube](#), September 6, 2012; see also [MLM Briefs](#), February 28, 2015). Like Captain Hassan Ibrahim, Captain Haj Ali was a member of Alwiya Afhaad al-Rasul's command council (Viber Interview, April 28).

Like many of the Jabal al-Zawiya armed opposition groups, the Hawks of the Zawiya Mountain Brigade were formerly constituent members within the district's powerful rebel coalition, Jabhat Thuwar Sooria (Syria Revolutionaries Front), led by Jamal Maarouf ([Orient Reports](#), December 11, 2015). Although Captain Haj Ali would later lead the Mountain Hawks Brigade out of the Syria Revolutionaries Front, his organization continued to fight alongside the Syrian Revolutionaries Front against both the al-Assad government and the Islamic State (Viber Interview, April 28; [YouTube](#), February 24, 2014). The Mountain Hawks Brigade was one of the more powerful constituent groups within the Syrian Revolutionaries Front-led alliance of Idlib and Aleppo-based rebel groups that pushed IS out of Idlib between December 2013-February 2014 (Viber Interview, April 28; for more details on this anti-IS campaign see: [PBS Frontline](#), February 11, 2014; [Al-Arab \[Idlib\]](#), January 6, 2014; [YouTube](#), January 3, 2014).

However, under Captain Haj Ali's leadership, the Mountain Hawks Brigade—like a number of U.S.-backed rebel groups—still cooperates militarily with militant Salafist organizations that work closely with the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, particularly Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya (Islamic Movement of the Free Ones of the Levant), in rebel offensives against the al-Assad government in Idlib and Aleppo governorates ([Enab Baladi \[Aleppo\]](#), February 16; [All4Syria \[Aleppo\]](#), May 9, 2015;

Al-Jazeera [Doha], February 3, 2015). Also under Captain Haj Ali's command, the Mountain Hawks Brigade has been an active participant in northern Syrian armed opposition efforts to unify under a collective coordination and command structure, such as al-Faylaq al-Khams (Fifth Corps), Jaysh al-Nasr (Victory Army), Ghurfat Amaliyyat Fateh Halab (Aleppo Conquest Operations Room). Although he has not been the overall commander of these projects to institutionalize a unified armed opposition army in northern Syria, Captain Haj Ali maintains an important coordinating role within them (Revolutionary Forces of Syria Media Office [Idlib], February 17; YouTube, August 3, 2015; also see MLM Briefs, November 30, 2014).

He continues to be an active front-line commander within the Free Syrian Army, both against the al-Assad government and the Islamic State (Viber Interview, April 28; YouTube, July 8, 2015; YouTube, July 4, 2015; YouTube, June 26, 2014). He states that the Mountain Hawks Brigade is proud of its role in the armed opposition, and he asserts that his organization is one of the most widely traveled in Syria, providing fighters for battles in Homs, Lattakia, Idlib, and Aleppo governorates (Viber Interview, April 28). Captain Haj Ali earned particular noteworthiness for his role as a front-line leader of the armed opposition's campaign to seize the important and strategic Wadi Dayf Syrian Air Force base in the southern area of Idlib governorate, which lasted over the course of two years from 2012-2014, and fell under armed opposition control in December 2014. U.S.-backed, TOW-supplied organizations, prominent among them the Mountain Hawks Brigade, are reported to have used their anti-tank missiles effectively to apply strong pressure against al-Assad government forces (Etilaf [Idlib], December 21, 2014; Al-Akhbar [Beirut], December 19, 2014; Al-Jazeera [Doha], July 16, 2014; YouTube, March 4, 2014).

Captain Haj Ali is noteworthy for being one of the first U.S.-vetted, Syrian moderate armed opposition commanders to receive military assistance for his organization, and to have continued to maintain that assistance over the course of several years. This sustained level of assistance from the U.S. and its regional partners is significant, as well as the number of theaters in northern Syria where the Mountain Hawks Brigade contributes fighters to the armed opposition. While the Mountain Hawks Brigade is not the largest moderate armed opposition organization in northern Syria, it is one of the most active combatants against both the al-Assad government and the Islamic State. Assuming he survives, the future challenge for Captain Haj Ali will be whether he and other like-minded armed opposition commanders can limit the power of ideological extremist actors within the Syrian rebel movement and their control over opposition-governed areas. These ideological extremist organizations, which include the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra, Jabhat al-Nusra's close and continuing ally Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, represent a future challenge to inclusive, non-sectarian governance in post-Assad Syria. Moderate armed opposition commanders, such as Captain Haj Ali, may be forced to militarily confront these groups in order to prevent their dominance over rebel-ruled areas in northern Syria.

[1] Author's Viber interview with Captain Hassan Haj Ali, April 28, 2016.

Al-Qaeda Top Leader's Younger Brother, Muhammad Rabee al-Zawahiri, Released

Muhammad Mansour

Muhammed Rabee al-Zawahiri, a younger brother of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, was released from Egyptian prison on March 17. A court had acquitted him on October 15 of charges related to forming an al-Qaeda-linked terrorist group called “al-Zawahiri cell” in Egypt, as well as plotting attacks against various targets inside the country ([Al-Shorouk](#), March 17). Alongside al-Zawahiri, 17 other suspects were acquitted, while 10 were sentenced to death, 32 were sentenced to life in prison, and 18 were sentenced to 15 years in prison ([Al-Ahram](#), October 15, 2015; [Al-Masry Al-Youm](#), October 15, 2015).

Al-Zawahiri was arrested on August 17, 2013, following the military coup against the democratically-elected president, Mohamed Morsi. His arrest came as an extension of a wider crackdown on dissent, particularly after the violent breakup of the Rabaa encampment, which claimed the lives of at least 1,000 protesters in mid-August 2013. Zawahiri's high-profile status among jihadist groups justified his quick arrest, especially after he posted on Facebook that he was closely following developments and would only intervene at the right time. “We reassure all our brothers that we are closely following what is happening, and will not interfere or call for intervention unless it is the right time, and in the religiously correct stances,” Zawahiri wrote on his Facebook page. He continued, “We hope that everyone keeps in touch with each other, and does not rush or be late for the right time” ([Al-Masry Al-Youm](#), August 17, 2013).

According to investigators, Zawahiri had prepared his organization to rebel against the state during the seismic final days of the one-year rule of President Mohamed Morsi. The investigators suggested that the defendants had recruited and trained jihadists at secret locations in Cairo and Sharqiya governorates. Police said 50 of the suspects had been arrested with various weapons and explosives in their possession, in addition to maps of sensitive facilities and information on a number of public figures ([Al-Masry al-Youm](#), June 15, 2014).

Mohamed al-Zawahiri was first imprisoned in Egypt in April 1999 after being detained and extradited from the United Arab Emirates. After his graduation from engineering college at Cairo University in 1975, he left Egypt to work for a construction firm in Saudi Arabia. In 1981, his name was included among those accused of assassinating the late president, Anwar al-Sadat, and—despite the fact that he was acquitted of all charges in absentia by an Emergency State Security court—Zawahiri feared returning home. After learning Wahhabi-style Islam in Saudi Arabia, he worked for the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), the Saudi-based organization that, according to one analyst “played an important role in helping the Mujahideen in Bosnia with money and logistics.” According to that same analyst, Mohamed al-Zawahiri was employed by the Albanian office of the IIRO, where he assisted al-Qaeda's efforts in the Balkans. [1] During the Kosovo crisis (1999-2000), the IIRO actively supported Kosovar refugees in Albania and Kosovo. By the mid-1980s, 13 members of Islamic Jihad were in Albania's capital Tirana working for the IIRO branch there. [2]

Yet, al-Zawahiri did not feel safe in Saudi Arabia after the Saudi authorities began cracking down on Islamists. In the 1990s, he left first for Yemen and then traveled to Sudan, where he reunited with his elder brother Ayman—who was the last

"emir" of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad at that time—and the founder of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden. In 1995, both brothers and bin Laden were expelled from Sudan after the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt increased pressure on the Sudanese government. They all headed to Afghanistan, but Mohammed soon took his wife and six children to Yemen to pursue a career as an engineer. His work took him to the UAE, where he was arrested and rendered to Egypt, at which time he received a death sentence by a military court in April 1999 in a mass trial of a case known as the “Returnees from Albania” ([Al-Dostour](#), April 6; [YouTube](#), March 23, 2013).

For five years, Mohamed al-Zawahiri was held in a heavily-guarded prison. His whereabouts were unknown; even his family assumed he had been executed in accordance with the death sentence he had been given. Surprisingly, on February 28, 2004, the London-based *Asharq al-Awsat* newspaper reported that he was still alive and being held in the Tora prison complex ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), February 28, 2004). His uncle Mahfouz Azzam visited him there in 2004 and heard from him that he had been subjected to torture and ill-treatment. ([Human Rights Watch interview with Mahfuz Azzam](#), Cairo, December 2004).

In March 2011, Mohamed al-Zawahiri was released from prison following the uprising that led to the ousting of Mubarak; he was arrested again soon after. Zawahiri was released one year later—during the 16-month rule of the military junta—after all the terrorism charges against him were dropped. During his brief time out of prison, he became involved in politics and called for protests on September 11, 2012, at the United States embassy in Cairo. “The blatant blasphemy on the Prophet Muhammad is absolutely unacceptable, it is unforgivable crime,” Mohamed al-Zawahiri said during an interview with Fox News, in reply to a question about the reasons for the anti-

American protest ([YouTube](#), October 21, 2012). On January 18, 2013, he organized a demonstration in front of the French embassy in Cairo to protest France’s intervention in Mali. He described France's military actions as "threatening the return of French colonialism against Arab and Islamic peoples" and stated that France was at war with Islam ([Al-Watan](#), January 18, 2013) ([Al-Sharq al-Awsat](#), January 19, 2013).

After 13 years in prison, Mohamed al-Zawahiri appeared in 2012 in myriad media outlets. Unlike other Salafists who were involved in forming political parties, he remained independent and did not abandon his jihadist ideology. In an interview with Al-Jazeera Mubasher in July 2012 he said, “Arab revolutions will not succeed without the U.S. feeling that it was hit at home” ([YouTube](#), July 31, 2012).

In the wake of his release, Mohamed al-Zawahiri will likely have no de facto role in the jihadist circles—being that he is under house arrest and so closely monitored—meaning that he will not be able to communicate with or influence other jihadists like those in Sinai.

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Notes:

[1] Roy, Olivier and Sfeir, Antoine, *The Columbia World Dictionary of Islamism*, Columbia University Press, 2007.

[2] Freeman, Michael, *Financing Terrorism: Case Studies*, Ashgate Pub Company, 2012.

Post-Mortem Analysis: The Last Five Years in the Life of Saddam Loyalist Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri

Chantelle Berman

He was one of Saddam Hussein's key advisers and the leader of a militia temporarily tied to the Islamic State (IS). Now he is reportedly dead, reportedly killed in April 2015 in Salahuddin province ([Al Arabiya](#), April 17, 2015). Since 2011, topics of significance surrounding Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri have been his involvement in two key organizations: the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order (Jaysh Rijāl at-Ṭarīqa an-Naqshabandiya, known also as JRTN) and his ephemeral involvement with IS.

Izzat al-Douri and Saddam Hussein

Al-Douri served as the vice chairman of Saddam Hussein's top governing body—the Revolutionary Command Council—and was Hussein's closest adviser and deputy. Both men were from the same Tikriti tribal background, and al-Douri was a key player in the 1968 coup that brought Hussein to power. Following Hussein's execution in 2006, al-Douri became the confirmed leader of the previously banned Iraqi Ba'ath Party, and he managed to avoid arrest, despite being the sixth most wanted man by the U.S. government from Hussein's regime ([The Telegraph \[Iraq\]](#), April 17, 2015.)

The “King of Clubs”—al-Douri's nickname—represented Hussein's officially dissolved Ba'ath Party long after his death. Al-Douri has held a longstanding leadership position within the Sufi insurgent collective, which was aligned with Ba'athist ideals and known as Jaysh Rijāl at-Ṭarīqa an-Naqshabandiya (JRTN). JRTN was assembled in 2007 under the guidance of al-Douri to free Iraq from all forms of “occupation,

subordination, sectarianism and racism, including its unity, independence, sovereignty, security and stability,” and al-Douri was quickly initiated as a Naqshbandi sheikh, automatically connecting him to the Prophet Muhammad and elevating his position of power. [1]

Al-Douri Makes Contact

During the years he spent as both a fugitive and commander of JRTN, al-Douri released several audio and video messages. The first audio message, released in November 2011, condemned a massive arrest campaign against members of the Ba'ath Party, and the first video of al-Douri was uploaded to YouTube in April 2012. In the video, he criticizes the Shi'ite-led government, as well as Iran's involvement in Iraqi politics ([YouTube](#), April 8, 2012). Almost a year later, al-Douri released another YouTube video in January of 2013, this time supporting Sunni protests in Nineveh and Anbar provinces against then-Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki ([The Daily Star Lebanon](#), January 5, 2013). For two weeks, tens of thousands of Sunnis staged demonstrations accusing Maliki of marginalizing their community and monopolizing power and al-Douri responded in support of these protests, saying the Ba'ath Party leadership was considering a campaign to punish civilians and soldiers who supported Iran's alleged plan to annex Iraq ([Asharq Al-Awsat](#), January 5, 2013). Shortly after this video was released, the Iraqi government claimed it was closing in on al-Douri ([Reuters \[Baghdad\]](#), April 18, 2013), who was allegedly moving between Tikrit, Hawija, and Dour.

JRTN and IS

During the summer of 2014, al-Douri's fighters helped other Iraqi jihadists successfully launch an insurgency across western and northern Iraq, effectively wiping out the U.S.-trained Iraqi army. Led by al-Douri, JRTN called for the Iraqi

people “to be unified, to embrace their valiant resistance, and to hold their national, nationalist, and Islamic forces so as to sweep this political process” ([Al Jazeera](#), July 9, 2014). JRTN reputedly aided in the fall of Mosul and Tikrit, while al-Douri played a role in the northern offensive as commander and was seen fighting alongside IS fighters.

And as IS traversed large swaths of Iraq—allegedly with JRTN at its side—Baghdad remained in a political deadlock, which was more than likely endorsed by al-Douri and his militia.

Fundamentally, JRTN and IS are ideological rivals but were united for a time by a staunch anti-Maliki stance, allowing for al-Douri’s initial tactical alliance with Baghdadi’s militants in early 2014. However, the groups’ cooperation has not been consistent by any means and dissipated rather quickly as IS seized territorial control at JRTN’s expense ([Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi](#), June 2015). By June 2014, reports surfaced of skirmishes between IS and JRTN fighters over the negligible issue of the proliferation of Saddam Hussein banners. Several days later, a number of al-Douri’s fighters were killed in clashes with IS in Hawija. Baghdadi’s men executed several JRTN members after the insurgent group planned attacks against IS. Yet, in a bizarre twist, al-Douri—in his first speech after the fall of Mosul in July 2014—spoke positively of IS fighters, lauding them as “heroes and knights,” and called for cooperation and unity among anti-government insurgent groups in order to increase the likelihood of victory. He even expressed the “love and pride” he felt for IS ([YouTube](#), July 12, 2014).

However, in April 2015, al-Douri directly denounced IS, stating the group championed *takfiri* ideals, which call for the deaths of Muslims of different sects. In this statement, al-Douri

drew, in no uncertain terms, a clear ideological line between JRTN and IS. The groups’ alliance of convenience dissolved as tensions between the two organizations and their disparate ideologies grew. In the following month, violent clashes between the groups continued, prompting al-Douri to release yet another statement in which he claimed no alliance ever existed between JRTN and IS ([Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi](#), June, 2015).

Allegations of Death

In late April 2015, al-Douri was reportedly killed by Iraqi security forces and Shiite militiamen from the Badr Organization in the Hamrin Mountains between Tikrit and Kirkuk. The body was transferred to the Iraqi government in Baghdad, where DNA tests were supposed to be conducted. They had a body, but no DNA to compare it to. This was not the first time claims of al-Douri’s death had surfaced ([Al-Arabiya](#), April 25, 2015). And, in an audiotape released the following month on Al Tagheer, a Ba’athist channel, al-Douri commented on several recent events occurring around the Middle East and refuted reports that he had been killed ([YouTube](#), May 15, 2015). He also reaffirmed his distance from Baghdadi and IS, saying the two do cross paths, but that IS considers the Ba’athists infidels and further cooperation would therefore not be possible.

Al-Douri resurfaced yet again in early April 2016 in a video obtained by Al-Arabiya, faulting the United States for the deteriorating situation in Iraq and urging Arab states to stand against Iran under the Saudi-led Arab coalition ([Al Arabiya](#), April 7).

Implications

JRTN and Iraqi government officials continue to issue conflicting reports on whether Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri is dead or alive. The evidence

suggests Hussein's top commander is alive and well, and hiding in an Iraqi village and commanding his militia from afar. While al-Douri has been a significant figure in the Ba'athist opposition to Iraq's Shiite government, the jury is out regarding the significance of al-Douri's reported death. If he is truly dead, or were to be killed imminently, would it matter? Some say al-Douri's death could cause a split in the JRTN, while others say al-Douri's heyday is long over and his death would be merely a blip on the radar. The internal structure of a group like JRTN is certainly a personal one and—while there is the potential for fragmentation upon al-Douri's death—it is prudent to look at other cases where the United States has “decapitated” a militant organization and the group simply produced another leader to take the place of its deceased commander; such cases include the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

It is most likely that Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri remains a shadowy figure cloaked in secrecy, pulling the strings of Jaysh Rijāl at-Ṭarīqa an-Naqshabandiya.

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Notes:

[1] See JTRN's statement here: <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2014/12/the-naqshbandi-army-current-situation-in-iraq>

Love as a Propaganda Machine: A Profile of Islamic State's Jihadist-Love Culture Propagandist, “Shams”

Halla Diyab

The Islamic State's (IS) construction of a revolutionary jihadist-love culture and its perpetuation of a narrative that stands in deep contrast to the barbaric atrocities of the group demonstrates the organization's attempts to romanticize the jihadist experience to gain sympathy and support from a wider audience.

A key propagandist of this tactic is Malaysian militant “Shams,” who leads an online operation romanticizing and idealizing the jihadist experience from *hijrah* to martyrdom.

Background

Under the moniker of Bird of Jannah, the 27-year-old doctor left her middle-class life in Malaysia behind to perform *hijrah* to Syria in February 2014. [1] Her social media posts indicate that she traveled to Syria via Turkey and that her parents, who were at first upset about her travel to Syria, quickly grew “supportive and happy” (*Astro Awani*, September 19, 2014).

While working on an orthopedic ward in Raqqa, Shams fell in love with a Moroccan-born jihadist known as “Abu Baraa.” Since she did not speak his language, the star-crossed lovers communicated through dictionary apps that they had both downloaded to their phones. In April 2014, she married him with the help of a female matchmaking militant (*Astro Awani*, September 19, 2014).

Pregnant with the child of her new jihadist husband, Shams then decided to lead an intensive online campaign exclusively in English

to promote life in the Islamic State on her online tumblr, “Diary of Muhajirah.” Her blog gained 277,000 followers and became a place where she documented her inner sentiments towards Abu Baraa, detailing each moment of the couple’s love story, from her first sight of him to their wedding day. [2] It is this uniquely manipulative, romanticized, hypnotizing oratory that makes Shams an important part of this popularized culture, yet also one of the most dangerous female militants in the Islamic State’s recruitment structure.

“Marriage in the land of Jihad; till martyrdom do us part”

With a Tumblr written in the style of a romantic novel, glorifying a whirlwind love and the perils of fighting and martyrdom, Shams’ account of her marriage is very propagandistic in style. She mixes reassurance with phrases like “people have misconceptions about marriage there.” She references female freedom (“they can choose whether to marry”), offers marital advice (“but it is better to marry to avoid fitnah”), and makes references to being surrounded by family and friends; Shams mentions the happiness of her parents, writing about “mother joyfully shouting on phone and father consenting,” and states that her best friend is like her mother and that her husband is just like her father ([MannWaSalwah Tumblr](#), September 14, 2014).

Shams’ detailed description of her sentiments prior to her first meeting with her jihadist husband is woven in a way to build up excitement, suspense, and anticipation in order to captivate the emotional vulnerability of the readers: “I made my little steps. Sat. I was trembling. Nervous. Scared. My emotions were mixed... I had palpitation[s] that [were] faster than the speed of light ([Al-Arabiya](#), September 18, 2014). The rhetoric is overcharged with seductive visuals of being affectionately close with her jihadist husband, yet physically distant

from him, including images such as “sit on another sofa that isn’t far from him” and “after few minutes, I flipped my Niqab. He looked at me, our eyes catch each other’s” ([Al-Arabiya](#), September 18, 2014). The powerful visuals humanize the jihadists for the readers.

The narrative is heavily overlaid with romance, such as eyes meeting, nervousness, palpitations, expectancy, and falling in love. The density of Shams’ narrative seems to liberate the two jihadists temporarily from their affiliations with the barbaric terrorist group, and portrays them as humans like us—capable of innately human experiences such as nervousness and affection. This narrative aims to manufacture an image of the jihadists not as savage or uncivilized creatures, but rather as the very same people we see in our normal daily lives.

Love as a Propaganda Machine

While female jihadist brides are always covered in black or invisible in her visual posts, there is a heavy focus on the physical presence of the male jihadist in Shams’ posts. He is always visible and engaged in emotional expressions to his bride, seen cuddling her, kissing her forehead, and holding her hand. This is mainly a tactic to alter the public perception of the jihadists as murderers and barbaric killers, hoping to humanize them by presenting them as romantic men who love and care for their women.

Although Shams’ declaration of love may seem romantic, behind her gushing stands the leering shadow of the jihadist cause, which controls the jihadist couple’s union. Shams will expect to see the name of her husband on the list of martyrs one day. Therefore, love is arranged and perpetuated as a temporary state that inevitably leads to eventual martyrdom. The rhetoric of love is constructed within the jihadist narrative and is manipulated by the jihadist cause, which possesses the power to end, dismantle, or

reconstruct the ties between the two lovers at any time. The ties the jihadist couple has to the jihadist cause are stronger than the ties they have to each other; the jihadist is “married to Jihad before” he is married to Shams. As Abu Baraa puts it: “Jihad is my first wife, and you’re my second” ([Al-Arabiya](#), September 18, 2014). On the other hand, Shams is equally as ready to sacrifice her husband: “He [God] took everyone away from me [...] He gave me world’s most amazing gift—a baby in my very own womb” ([Omermaricar80 Tumblr](#), September 28, 2014).

Emotional manipulation

Shams masters the craft of manipulative rhetoric, alternating between the language of romance and of the shrewd realism of the jihadist cause. Her tactic of manipulation operates on rhetoric that she shapes according to the message of the terrorist group, choosing when she wants to be seen as a woman publicly documenting her fairy tale of a marriage. This strategy is explicit when she tones down her poetic language, shifting to practicality in one of her online posts. Glorifying the Islamic State, Shams lists ten facts “from the Islamic State that everyone should know.” The list includes “free housing” to “monthly groceries supplies” and a “free medical checkup... etc.,” a message that succeeds in garnering mass readership and public attention that she previously gained through telling her romantic tale ([KSN](#), January 20, 2016).

Shams’ mode of operation is to linguistically manipulate her spectators to entice them to join the group. Her strong use of poetic rhetoric is what supports her manipulative tactics; she first attracts readers with the promise of a captivating and relatable romantic tale, and then integrates her jihadist recruitment messages into that very same blog. For example, in one particular blog post, she utilizes the story of her marriage to

explain perceived misconceptions about the Islamic State: “I hope it would clear the misconceptions that many have regarding marriages that take place in Shaam” ([MannWaSalwah Tumblr](#), September 14, 2014).

Shams’ manipulation tactics are part of her recruiting strategy to access and groom a wider audience for her jihadist undertones, especially women readers. Her online visibility—but opaque identity—enables her to perpetuate the fantasy of living and loving in the Islamic State.

Militant Discourse

After gaining loyal followers, Shams’ rhetoric shifted from romantic narrative into militant discourse, evidence that her narrative was simply a structured propagandist online campaign to promote the message of the group. In March 2015, Shams’ tweets started to become explicitly militant, calling Muslims who live in the lands of Kufr [reference to Europe and the West] to carry out attacks against non-Muslims, glorifying the territorial expansion of the Islamic State: “Good news for all of you. Islamic state [sic] is expanding” ([RFE/RL](#), March 20, 2015).

Shams grew to be more direct and explicit in instructing other Muslims to carry militant operations aiming “to take control of local lands.” Suddenly, her romanticized poetic and linguistic metaphors faded away and were replaced by direct, imperative, violence-inciting verbs such as “get stronger,” “gain power,” “take control over,” “learn from your brothers in Libya” and “terrorize them as they terrorized us” ([RFE/RL](#), March 20, 2015).

Shams not only propagated and glamorized the traditional roles of women as lovers and wives within the group, but used her rhetoric to evoke a rebuttal against the image of the archetypal female jihadist militant as submissive and

demeaned sexual objects. She promoted the fact that there is the possibility of a career in the terrorist group, stating that the Islamic State is planning “more programs which sisters can benefit from” and that women “are also allowed to work [...] as teachers, doctors and nurses” (*Al-Monitor*, December 23, 2014).

Conclusion

The danger of Shams’ narrative lies in the fact that she has a story to tell, and people are captivated by stories. She has an ongoing tale of love, loss, sacrifice, and yearning—all of which made her appealing and possible to identify with, despite her categorization as a militant jihadist. Shams craftily manipulates her love story in an effective strategy to toy with the emotions and desires of vulnerable young Muslims who crave an idealized romantic adventure in a remote land.

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Notes:

[1] *Hijrah* is performing the call to arms (*al-nafir*) by traveling to the Islamic State’s self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria and Iraq for the purpose of jihad and fighting in support of the terrorist group.

[2] Shams’ tumblr, “Diary of Muhajirah,” which garnered 277,000 followers, was deactivated. However, her posts have reblogged on several tumblrs, under different names including, “Bittersweet: The life of a Muhajirah” (<http://alrashidk1.tumblr.com/diary-of-a-muhajirah>), “The Reblogs of Diary of Muhajirah” (<http://zakarias79.tumblr.com/post/111757456768/diary-of-a-muhajirah-4>), and “Just Me” (<http://omermaricar80.tumblr.com/>), among others.

An In-Depth Portrait of Major Muhammad Eyad Shamsi: Military Strategist for the Syrian Rebel Group Authenticity and Development Front

Nicholas A. Heras

There is currently a nascent campaign supported by the U.S.-led multinational anti-Islamic State (IS) Coalition to build a local, Syrian Sunni Arab armed opposition movement against IS in the core areas of its control in eastern Syria (*Terrorism Monitor*, March 18; *MLM Briefs*, December 31, 2015; *Terrorism Monitor*, August 21, 2015). Jabhat Asala wal-Tanmiya (Authenticity and Development Front), a national umbrella organization of largely Salafist constituent armed opposition groups—a large number of which are originally from the eastern Syrian governorate of Deir al-Zor on the Syrian-Iraqi border—is led by the Syrian Kuwait-based popular Sunni religious figure, Sheikh Khalid al-Hamad (*Al-Hadath News*, December 10, 2015).

An organization that is nominally working toward the creation of a state guided by *sharia* after the conflict, the Authenticity and Development Front works closely with states opposed to the al-Assad government, including the United States, and is one of the primary contributors to the effort to remove the Islamic State from eastern Syria (Viber Interview, April 28; *Terrorism Monitor*, March 18; *MLM Briefs*, December 31, 2015; *Terrorism Monitor*, August 21, 2015). [1] Major Muhammad Eyad Shamsi, 38, is the Turkey-based military commander of the Jabhat Asala wal-Tanmiya coalition, and is a senior member of the Syrian armed opposition’s delegation in the Syrian National Coalition’s Higher Negotiating Committee that is currently

engaged in the diplomatic process to seek a conclusion to the Syrian civil war (Zaman al-Wasal, April 15; Al-Hadath News, December 10, 2015; All4Syria, December 7, 2015).

Major Shamsi, a native of the strategic town of al-Rastan due north of the city of Homs in central-western Syria's Homs governorate, is the primary military strategist for the Authenticity and Development Front, including the organization's provision of logistics to its constituent armed groups (Viber Interview, April 28). He is also the primary coordinator of the Authenticity and Development Front's anti-IS effort that has two distinct but related goals. The first aim is to identify, recruit, and mobilize eastern Syrian armed opposition fighters that have been displaced from their home region by IS into a vanguard military force to contest IS's control over eastern Syria. Major Shamsi's second goal is to develop and expand a network of individuals inside of IS-controlled areas of eastern Syria to conduct sabotage operations and to inspire internal uprisings against IS rule (Viber Interview, April 28).

Major Shamsi defected from the Syrian Arab Army in Damascus in October 2012, shortly after serving a five and a half-month prison term that began in May 2012 while he was still an officer in the Syrian military (Viber Interview, April 28). Major Shamsi states that his situation was similar to a number of other Sunni military officers, as he was placed under heavy surveillance by the al-Assad government's security forces from the start of the Syrian uprising in March 2011. He was arrested and jailed after the Syrian military intelligence services received information—correctly, as it turned out—that he was preparing to defect to the armed opposition (Viber Interview, April 28). After he was released from prison, Major Shamsi did indeed defect from the military and relocated to his native town of al-Rastan, which was by that point an important center for the armed

opposition in Homs governorate (Viber Interview, April 28).

Major Shamsi joined the Authenticity and Development Front's then growing national organization while in al-Rastan, and in January 2013 he permanently left al-Rastan and traveled to northern Syria (Viber Interview, April 28). Although a native son of al-Rastan, and a prominent figure in the broader Syrian revolution, the fact that Major Shamsi left the town and did not establish himself there caused a coalition of al-Rastan's major, moderate armed opposition groups to issue a statement in January 2016 that he did not represent them in the diplomatic process (Sooria Mubashar [Al-Rastan], January 13). After leaving al-Rastan, although he was officially referred to as the Authenticity and Development Front's commander responsible for Homs governorate, Major Shamsi had a broader portfolio of work as he traveled throughout northern Syria working to build the Authenticity and Development Front's organization in that region of the country (Viber Interview, April 28; Al-Quds Al-Arabi, May 5, 2014).

In the winter of 2014, Major Shamsi left northern Syria to live in southern Turkey where he worked to improve the Authenticity and Development Front's logistical lines of supply to its affiliates throughout northern Syria. He also established himself in Turkey in order to work more closely with foreign states that support the armed opposition against the al-Assad government (Viber Interview, April 28). Prior to leaving Syria for Turkey, Major Shamsi was a relatively obscure figure within the Syrian armed opposition for both Syrian revolutionary and international media organizations. After establishing himself in Turkey in 2014, Major Shamsi began to engage more with the international media, and has periodically communicated with the international media since then in order to raise awareness of his

organization, as well as the broader Syrian moderate armed opposition's, role in the fighting against the Islamic State and the al-Assad government (Reuters, April 15; Voice of America, October 1, 2015; McClatchy, September 5, 2014).

While the Authenticity and Development Front is seeking the overthrow of the al-Assad government, the organization's affiliated armed groups in Deir al-Zor government were among the first within the armed opposition to oppose the Islamic State. Major Shamsi's increasing influence within the Authenticity and Development Front over the course of 2014, and since then, has coincided with the rise of the IS to a position of predominate power in eastern Syria (Viber Interview, April 28). Primarily, he seeks to remain in contact with and mobilize into action the Authenticity and Development Front's affiliates that have been displaced from eastern Syria, and to assist them in receiving support from the anti-IS coalition, in order to initiate a campaign against IS (Viber Interview, April 28; see also Terrorism Monitor, March 18; MLM Briefs, December 31, 2015; Terrorism Monitor, August 21, 2015). In addition to this role, Major Shamsi also provides strategic direction for Authenticity and Development Front affiliates currently participating in a coalition of primarily U.S.-vetted and Coalition-backed moderate armed opposition campaign against IS northeast of Aleppo (Viber Interview, April 28). He also remains in contact with the efforts to undermine the position of IS in the areas it rules in eastern Syria, such as through the Deir al-Zor-based resistance network called Saraya Al-Kafn Al-Abyad (White Shroud Brigade), which consists of local, tribally-based fighters that are affiliated with the Free Syrian Army and Authenticity and Development (Viber Interview, April 28; see also Terrorism Monitor, December 19, 2014).

Major Shamsi is one of the most powerful armed opposition leaders who is currently

working with the U.S.-led, anti-Islamic State coalition. His power within the armed opposition is derived from his position as a trusted coordinator of a growing anti-IS network of actors on the ground inside of IS-controlled areas of Aleppo, Raqqa, and Deir al-Zor governorates. The Authenticity and Development Front—although it enjoys significant support that from regional states that are seeking the removal of the al-Assad government and has affiliated armed groups across Syria—is not powerful in the context of the territory it controls. Its power, which is wielded by Major Shamsi, is found in its large network of rebel fighters and activists, many of whom are ideologically Salafist or Islamist and are veterans of the Syrian civil war and are willing to confront IS. It is generally from this pool of fighters affiliated with the Authenticity and Development Front, most of whom have chosen to remain in Syria even when displaced from their home areas now under the control of IS, that the U.S.-led Coalition is seeking to build vanguard force. As the U.S.-led Coalition seeks to hasten the destruction of the Islamic State's Caliphate in eastern Syria, and to build a security force to hold territory taken from IS, it will likely continue to draw from the network overseen by Major Shamsi.

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Notes:

[1] Author's Viber interview with Major Muhammad Eyad Shamsi, April 28, 2016.

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