

MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

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IN THIS ISSUE:

BRIEFS

ABU MUHAMMAD NAMED NEW DAGESTANI AMIR OF CAUCASUS EMIRATE

By Mairbek Vatchagaev1

IMAM OF PRISHTINA'S GRAND MOSQUE ARRESTED

By Ebi Spahiu3

FUGITIVE EGYPTIAN MILITANT FAISAL SULIMAN SALMA AL-MAHSNA KILLED IN RAID

By Muhammad Mansour4

ABU MUHAMMAD AL-ADNANI: THE SYRIAN FACE OF THE 'ISLAMIC STATE'

By Murad Batal al-Shishani5

TUNISIA'S MOST WANTED: A PROFILE OF LOKMAN ABU SAKHR

By Dario Cristiani7

RISING THROUGH THE RANKS: A PORTRAIT OF JABHAT AL-NUSRA'S ABU MALIK AL-SHAMI

By Nicholas Heras9



Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the spokesperson of the Islamic State, as seen in a video message

ABU MUHAMMAD NAMED NEW DAGESTANI AMIR OF CAUCASUS EMIRATE

Mairbek Vatchagaev

Earlier this year Abu Muhammad, who became the new head of the Caucasus Emirate in the North Caucasus in March, made his first public address where he outlined his group's new priorities following the death of former leader Doku Umarov. Abu Muhammad's latest statement, which was made in a video posted online on July 2, outlined the strategy and tactics of the North Caucasus insurgency.

In the video, Abu Muhammad explained why Muslims should not support the head of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, but instead provide support to al-Qaeda leader Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri. [1] The leader of the North Caucasus militants has now put forward a new set of initiatives. Moreover, the video is significantly important because it defines the actions the regional militants will take in the North Caucasus for the near future. [2]

In a video interview before an audience made up mostly of fellow militants, one of the first questions concerned the use of suicide bombers. Amir Abu Muhammad unequivocally spoke out against suicide bombers. He said that there was no point in losing a militant only for the sake of carrying out a bomb attack somewhere in Russia. Abu Muhammad also spoke out against the use of female suicide bombing even more strongly, saying it is only justified when the police corner a woman and she thinks she will be persecuted if she surrenders. Abu Muhammad expressly prohibited female

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suicide bombers under all other circumstances, saying that he had previously prohibited many women from carrying out such attacks. The Caucasus Emirate leader then cited the example of Afghanistan, where he said there has not been a single case of *istishad* (suicide bombing by a female) (Kavkaz-Uzel, July 1). Abu Muhammad pointed out that this method of fighting was imported from elsewhere and was neither necessary nor obligatory in the North Caucasus.

The rebel leader said that the death of a female in a house surrounded by the police is of no use to the militants and asked what could be the purpose of the death of a young female, if she has the opportunity to surrender and hope that one day she will be exchanged or continue jihad after her release. As an example, Abu Muhammad cited the case of Ruzana Ibragimova, who was killed on April 24 in a special operation in Khasavyurt, Dagestan, while she was in her ninth month of pregnancy. Ibragimova refused to leave a house that was surrounded by police and decided to die along with her husband (Kavkaz-Uzel, April 25). The rebel leader reprimanded the dead woman for having taken this decision, saying that she had no right to make such decisions for her unborn child.

Abu Muhammad also said that most of the time civilians die in suicide attacks in Russia and that he, as the amir of the Caucasus Emirate, did not support attacks against civilians. At the same time, he noted that suicide bomb attacks would continue in Russia, but only against those who harm the militants. The insurgent leader said he would do everything possible to avoid civilian victims. Moreover, he offered apologies to the civilian population of Russia for all of the victims of suicide attacks (Russian Planet, July 2). In 2012, the then Caucasus Emirate leader Doku Umarov also suspended any terror attacks that would harm Russian civilians (RFE/RL, February 3, 2012). However, he broke the conditions of that truce a year later and called on the militants to carry out strikes across Russia, using all available means. [3]

Abu Muhammad also touched on relations with Sufism. According to the rebel leader, the Sufis are not the enemies of the insurgents and he did not want to have a conflict with the militants. However, he said that the Sufis decided to go to war with the Salafist insurgency after the official spiritual bodies, which are dominated by Sufis, declared war on Salafist militants. Therefore, the militants would continue attacks on people who harm the insurgents and cooperate with the authorities, Abu Muhammad said. This is not the first time that followers of the Caucasus Emirate have raised this issue. Two years ago, Umarov was also forced to say the rebels were not fighting the Sufis and did not consider them enemies per se. Rather, he said, the rebels thought of the

Sufis as brothers and asked them not to remain neutral, but to support the insurgency. [4]

Another question raised during the interview concerned whether Muslims in Russia should consider moving to Muslim countries because the Russian authorities do not allow Muslims to observe their religion. Abu Muhammad responded by saying that there was no country in the world that would fully satisfy the criteria of a true Islamic country, with Shari'a installed properly. Therefore, he said, no one should leave his or her country, which was a striking statement basically calling for Muslims in Russia to stay home and fight Russian authorities.

Out of all statements made by Abu Muhammad in the latest video, the most important was the one about suicide bombings. The new amir has not simply suspended the practice of suicide bombings as Doku Umarov did previously, but argued that the very practice of suicide bombings is useless and alien to the culture of the North Caucasus. Such statements have not been made since the Caucasus Emirate was founded in 2007. Instead of a moratorium, he is attempting to resolve this issue once and for all by removing it from the agenda entirely.

Mairbek Vatchagaev is a noted Chechen historian and political analyst on the North Caucasus.

Notes

1. "CE Amir Abu Muhammad: Related to Corruption in Damascus [sic]," Kavkaznews1, June 23, 2014, http://www.izlesene.com/video/ke-emiri-ali-ebu-muhammed-samdaki-fitne-ile-ilgili-ke-durusu/7581733?utm_source=player&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=player_clicktag_izlesene_embed.
2. "CE Amir Shaykh Ali Abu Muhammad: Questions and Answers. Part 2," Kavkaznews1, July 2, 2014, http://www.izlesene.com/video/ke-emiri-ali-ebu-muhammed-samdaki-fitne-ile-ilgili-ke-durusu/7581733?utm_source=player&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=player_clicktag_izlesene_embed.
3. "Doku Umarov Announced the Lifting of the Moratorium on the Terrorist Attacks in Russia," 3mv.ru, July 3, 2012, http://3mv.ru/publ/doku_umarov_objavil_o_snjatii_moratorija_na_terakty_v_rossii/1-1-0-17327.
4. "Doku Umarov: Sufis Are not Our Enemies and the Brothers," Anton Chexov, September 13, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PU3OromYeyw>.

IMAM OF PRISHTINA'S GRAND MOSQUE ARRESTED

Ebi Spahiu

Just over a month after Kosovo's police conducted a major operation in which they arrested 40 people accused of terrorism, links to extremist organizations including Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State (formerly the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS), and inciting religious hatred, they conducted yet another major sweep. 15 persons were arrested across the country, including nine *imams* and a member of an Islamic-rooted political party with seats in parliament (VOA, September 17). Among those booked on September 17 was Shefqet Krasniqi, the *imam* of Prishtina's Grand Mosque (RFE/RL, September 17). Since August 11, Kosovo has arrested a total of 55 individuals.

Dr. Shefqet Krasniqi is one of Kosovo's most influential and controversial religious figures due to his promotion of a Salafist vision of Islam, financial ties to several religious groups in Saudi Arabia and his public approval of the martyrdom of young Albanian jihadists dying in Syria (*Gazeta Express* [Prishtina], August 12). He became one of the first *imams* in the country to declare such support when, in May 2013, he publicly blessed a young Albanian man who was reportedly killed fighting in Syria. In a Facebook post that month, Krasniqi named the young Albanian fighter from Gostivar, Macedonia, who had reportedly died in Damascus, and quoted the Quran on the promised blessings for martyrs who sacrifice their lives for Allah. [1]

When the first series of arrests were made by Kosovo's police in August, several Kosovar media outlets were surprised that Krasniqi did not mention the arrests of many of his fellow *imams*. Instead, during a weekly Friday prayer, he spoke of the hardships Muslims need to live through in this life in order to earn their place in heaven: "The road to heaven (*janat*) is filled with barriers, whereas the road to hell (*jehenemet*) is filled with flowers" (*Gazeta Express* [Prishtina], August 15).

Prishtina's Grand Mosque is the largest religious institution under Bashkesia Islame e Kosoves (BIK – Islamic Union of Kosovo), which is an officially recognized religious institution under Kosovo's constitution. Dr. Krasniqi was also a lecturer for the Islamic Studies department at the University of Prishtina, which is managed by the BIK. As confirmed by his lawyer during a live interview for Kosova TV, Dr. Krasniqi is accused, among other things, of facilitating money laundering through the BIK's financial accounts (*Gazeta Express* [Prishtina], September 17). The BIK has promoted a Salafist vision of Islam and is believed to have supported the

recruitment of young Albanians to travel to the Middle East for jihad. Since the new *mufti* (chief Islamic jurist) of Kosovo, Naim Tervana, took over the BIK's leadership in 2008, the organization began silencing moderate religious leaders who spoke out against Salafism by either forcing them to resign or pressuring them to leave Kosovo altogether. The BIK has also tried to portray former leaders of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) as martyrs of Allah since many former KLA fighters have been recruited to fight in the Middle East. [2]

According to unconfirmed reports, more than 200 young ethnic Albanians from Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia have responded to the Islamic State's call to join the jihad. Radical Islam and the recruitment of ethnic Albanians into the ranks of the Islamic State pose a serious threat to the stability and security of the Balkans, a region that has been marred by ethnic tensions and war in the recent past. Despite these issues, religious harmony between Muslims and Christians is deeply rooted, particularly in Albania. The emergence of radical religious leaders like Dr. Shefqet Krasniqi inside official religious institutions that have long protected religious harmony is a key to understanding the lines of recruitment that hundreds of Albanians follow on their way to the Middle East.

Ebi Spahiu is an independent analyst of Central Asian and Western Balkan Affairs, focusing on gender and religious extremism.

Notes

1. See https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=659682470724988&substory_index=0&id=100000497236566.
2. Interview with Visar Duriqi, journalist based in Prishtina, September 2014.

Fugitive Egyptian Militant Faisal Suliman Salma al-Mahsna Killed in Raid

Muhammad Mansour

In July, Egyptian security forces raided the house of Faisal Suliman Salma al-Mahsna, a leading jihadist, after failing to find him for eight months. Al-Mahsna, 38, was shot to death at his house in Ismailiya province after a 30-minute exchange of fire with police. He was shot and ultimately killed by police when he realized he was besieged and attempted to blow himself up (*al-Masry al-Youm* [Cairo], July 31). According to the Egyptian authorities, al-Mahsna was a member of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis; however, the group itself has not confirmed this. Al-Mahsna's killing came amid the Egyptian military's heavy-handed crackdown on Islamist militants in the Sinai Peninsula and in Upper Egypt. That crackdown is aimed at hunting down the jihadists who launched the operation in July that claimed the lives of 22 Egyptian border guard soldiers at the al-Farafra checkpoint in Egypt's Western Desert region bordering both Libya and Sudan (*Daily News Egypt*, July 23, 2014). Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis has been blamed for the attack.

Al-Mahsna was born and raised in the village of al-Albatal in Egypt's northeastern Ismailiya province. He started his working life selling oil products for agricultural machines. Five years ago, residents of his village were surprised when they saw him growing a long beard and adopting an extremist interpretation of Islam. Members of his extended family confirmed to the prosecution investigator that al-Mahsna disappeared almost eight months ago and that his tribe abandoned him long ago. According to the State Security Investigations Service, al-Mahsna was a member of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, the Sinai-based militant organization, and was involved in several terrorist operations targeting police and army officers. Aside from the al-Farafra checkpoint attack, he was also involved in a failed assassination attempt on Muhammad Ibrahim, the Egyptian interior minister, in September 2013 (*al-Masry al-Youm* [Cairo], July 31).

During the July raid on al-Mashna's house, well-trained anti-terrorism squads tried to arrest him, first shooting his feet to prevent him from escaping. The police shot and killed Al-Mahsna when he tried to detonate a hand grenade. After his death, the security forces found a machine gun with a large number of bullets, two explosive belts and a hand grenade in his possession. Al-Mahsna's cell phone had one picture of him wearing a military uniform and another carrying a rocket-propelled grenade, as well as the phone numbers of

Islamic State militants based in Iraq and Sinai-based Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis leaders (*al-Masry al-Youm* [Cairo], July 31). The fact that he had these phone numbers shows the degree to which terrorist groups in the whole region are in contact with one another.

Militant attacks have been on the rise since the ouster of Egypt's Islamist president, Muhammad Mursi, on July 3, 2013, with over 500 security personnel killed (al-Bawaba, September 14). The attacks have become particularly more frequent in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.

The Egyptian military has increased the number of raids targeting Islamic militants since the July 2013 military coup, killing a large number of terrorists, especially in Sinai's insurgent strongholds. The insurgents, in turn, have escalated the number of terrorist attacks targeting both civilians and soldiers. Since June 28, an estimated 42 Islamic militants have been killed in military raids, compared to 31 police and army soldiers, along with 14 civilians, killed by the militants. [1]

On September 14, Egyptian Interior Minister Muhammad Ibrahim said in a press conference that a joint army and police offensive in Suez governorate had claimed the lives of seven members of the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis militant group (al-Arabiya, September 14). Ibrahim added that during an intense shootout with the militants, security forces ultimately managed to kill the seven members and later identified them via a DNA test. The minister said these members were "considered to be among the most dangerous elements of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis," adding that they were responsible for the Farafra and Dabaa shootings and had also participated in the bombings of the Cairo and Daqahliya security directorates. "The police are capable of facing the elements of evil, terrorism and outlaws," Ibrahim said as he concluded the press conference.

Moneer Adeeb, an expert on Islamist movements in Egypt, said: "Since the army has no experience fighting militant gangs in a guerrilla war, it will be a long-term war and the death toll among the army soldiers will be expectedly high. Yet, the army's victory over these groups will be eventually inevitable." [2]

Conclusion

Despite repeated statements by Egyptian officials pointing to the success of operations targeting militants, the return to authoritarian rule and a crackdown on all opposition voices will encourage Islamists to turn into violence. Political reform bringing moderate Islamists into the political process

would prevent the expansion of the extremists.

Still, al-Mahsna's death might have negatively affected the organizational work of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. According to Egyptian investigations, he was involved in several operations targeting police and army soldiers, so his death could be a victory for the security apparatus. However, the killing al-Mahsna was a short-term victory, not the most desired one. The way he was killed indicates that the group's strategy is to ensure that when a member's capture appears inevitable, he should fight to the death in order to deny the security apparatus the opportunity to extract information about other influential leaders or attacks. The fact that terrorist operations are increasing in a period when, thanks to authoritarian measures, political activity has declined, suggests Ansar Bayt al-Madisi has other, yet unknown leaders who could wreak havoc in Egypt.

Muhammad Mansour is an investigative journalist who covers a broad range of topics related to Egyptian politics and global affairs.

Note

1. Author's estimates based on news reports.
2. Author interview with Moneer Adeeb, August 2014.

Abu Muhammad al-Adnani: The Syrian Face of 'Islamic State'

Murad Batal al-Shishani

One of the major pieces of advice that jihadist ideologues have been giving their followers in the new areas where they are operating is to make local members leaders in order to reassure their local hosts and convince them to adopt their jihadist ideology. Abu Musab al-Suri, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Ayman al-Zawahiri each have advised the need to do this on various occasions (Al-Monitor, January 14, 2013; Terrorism Monitor, July 9, 2009; al-Hayat, November 11, 2013).

Despite its deep rift with al-Qaeda and other mainstream jihadists, the self-proclaimed Islamic State has followed this advice. They recently promoted Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, a Syrian member, to be their spokesperson. The Islamic State has been involved in the Syrian civil war since 2012-2013 after the escalation of violence in the country and militarization of the peaceful protest to topple Bashar al-Assad regime. [1]

New Spokesperson

Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, whose real name is Taha Sobhi Assa'd Falaha, has grabbed the attention of media and observers on three occasions. The first was when he openly criticized the leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Responding to al-Zawahiri's criticism of the Islamic State's behavior in Syria, al-Adnani stated his organization's position toward al-Qaeda:

Sorry, amir of al-Qaeda. [The Islamic] State is not a branch of al-Qaeda, and never has been. If Allah brought you to the land of the Islamic State, you will have to pay *bay'ah* (allegiance) to its Quraishi amir, the grandson of al-Hussain [al-Baghdadi], and become one of his soldiers. [2]

Later, al-Adnani made the headlines when he appeared with his face blurred in the video the Islamic State made after it took control of Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul. In it, Al-Adnani declared the destruction of the border between Iraq and Syria. [3] Later, on August 18, the U.S. State Department designated al-Adnani as a "Global Terrorist." [4]

Between Iraq and Syria

Al-Adnani is a product of jihadist networks that were created in Syria, which was the gateway to Iraq after the American

invasion in 2003. At that time, however, he was following the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who wanted to form a jihadist group that was more Levant-oriented. Links between the two men may have started when al-Adnani was in Lebanon; he migrated there from his hometown – Binnish in Syria’s Idlib governorate – in order to work as a builder in 1998. [5] According to an Islamic State ideologue, al-Adnani and 35 other Syrian jihadists pledged allegiance to al-Zarqawi in 2000 to wage war against the Assad regime in Syria. [6] However, it is not clearly in any of the biographies written about al-Adnani whether or not he met al-Zarqawi personally before the American invasion of Iraq. Hence, it is impossible to know how this *bay’ah* happened.

According to a leading jihadist ideologue, al-Adnani showed an interest in religious studies from an early age. [7] Others say he was also a shy and unsocial individual until he returned to his hometown as a jihadist leader in 2011. [8] Before that, he was arrested by the Syrian authorities on multiple occasions – one time on the border with Iraq, when he was trying to sneak back to fight against the Americans in 2003. [9] At that time, the Syrian regime was turning a blind eye to people flocking to Iraq.

Al-Adnani finally managed to cross over into Iraq and joined al-Zarqawi (who was killed by a U.S. air strike in June 2006). Al-Adnani gradually rose through the ranks of al-Qaeda in Iraq, starting out as a trainer in the Haditha training camp in Iraq’s western Anbar province and then in the al-Jazira training camp. [10] Since al-Adnani lacked military experience, his role was likely linked to providing religious education for the other trainees. Indeed, he later became the religious adviser for the organization in al-Anbar before becoming the spokesperson for Islamic State. [11]

Conclusion

Al-Adnani had been studying religious doctrine informally, which meant that he studied a certain topic on his own and then presented his credentials for approval by another jihadist cleric. This process is becoming easier due to the Internet. Al-Adnani’s credentials were approved in Iraq by the late Abu Anas al-Shami, a Jordanian who was al-Zarqawi’s religious adviser, and by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself. [12]

Three main conclusions can be drawn from al-Adnani’s promotion to the position of Islamic State spokesperson. First, this jihadist group has the ability to generate leaders by investing in skills that members already have. Secondly, the jihadist networks in Syria that emerged following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 have played major roles

throughout the Syrian civil war, which suggests that the border regions of both countries became a jihadist hub and explains the Islamic State’s ability to control those border regions. Thirdly, al-Adnani’s profile shows that the Islamic State is utilizing existing jihadist literature when establishing its own policies in the areas it controls.

Murad Batal al-Shishani is an Islamic groups and terrorism issues analyst based in London. He is a specialist on Islamic movements in the Middle East and in the North Caucasus.

Notes

1. The Islamic State was previously known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its predecessor was al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was known as al-Qaeda in the Land of Mesopotamia.
2. A speech by Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani Ash-Shami, “Sorry, Amir of Al-Qaeda,” Al-Furqan Media Foundation, May 11, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrwvi5vqC_w.
3. The video can be watched here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4Xh2EPr6qM>.
4. “Terrorist Designation of Abu Muhammad al-Adnani,” U.S. State Department, August 18, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/230676.htm>.
5. A short biography of al-Adnani can be found here <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/03f67daf-e170-4368-88bd-6b221ddd3ca9>.
6. Islamic State ideologue Turkey Bin Ali (a.k.a. Abu Hamamm Baker al-Athri), a biography of al-Adnani, May 26, 2014, which can be read here <http://www.gulfup.com/?ziPYqa>.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Al-Araby, *Op. Cit.*
9. Bin Ali, *Op. Cit.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*

Tunisia's Most Wanted: A Profile of Lokman Abu Sakhr

Dario Cristiani

After the successful revolution of 2011 that overthrew long-standing dictator Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia has gone through a complex transition period, whose end is still far from over. In this changing context, jihadist terrorism has increasingly become an issue for the Tunisian authorities. Although Tunisia has been the target of terrorist actions in the past – for instance in 2002, when a group attacked European tourists in Djerba – the salience of the terrorist threat has risen significantly over the past three years. Regional organizations, primarily al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), have tried to infiltrate Tunisia and turn it into another jihadist battlefield. In this context, it is important to analyze the role and the profile of Lokman Abu Sakhr (a.k.a. Khaled Chaïeb), leader of Katiba d'Oqba Ibn Nafaa of AQIM and now also of Ansar al-Shari'a in Tunisia. He is considered to be the most dangerous and active terrorist now operating in the country.

Personal Background

Sakhr is a native of Bejaia, the capital of Algeria's Bejaia Province, which is the biggest city in the Kabylia region and one of the largest Berber-speaking cities of Algeria. He studied chemistry at university, and while he did not graduate, he used his expertise to fabricate explosive devices and supervise suicide attacks (Africa Manager, January 14). Sakhr's personal background is similar to that of AQIM amir Abdelmalek Droukdel, who was a chemist as well and who used his skills and expertise to supervise attacks (*Jeune Afrique*, October 1, 2012). In fact, relations between Sakhr and Droukdel are very strong. Droukdel appointed Sakhr to head a *katiba* (brigade) of AQIM later named Katiba d'Oqba Ibn Nafaa. Oqba Ibn Nafi was the name of an Arab general who served the Umayyad dynasty and began the Islamic conquest of the Maghreb. This *katiba* is linked to Ansar al Shari'a, both in Libya and Tunisia. Indeed, Abu Sakhr is considered the leader of the latter as well: he was appointed head of the organization after its previous charismatic leader, Abu Yhad, was arrested under rather unclear circumstances in Libya at the end of 2013 (Tuniscope, February 27; BusinessNews.com.tn, December 30, 2013)

Katiba d'Oqba Ibn Nafaa allegedly has a number of cells spread across Libya, Tunisia and Algeria, and authorities have arrested members of the group in Tunis, Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid. Security officials hold Sakhr responsible

for the May attack on the family home of Tunisian Interior Minister Lotfi Ben Jeddou in Kasserine. In that attack, more than ten gunmen dressed in paramilitary uniforms killed four policemen and wounded another (Tunis Afrique Press, May 28). Ben Jeddou considered the attack a response to the police operation which dismantled terrorist groups in Ben Guerdane that were planning attacks against tourist resorts and political personalities (Kapitalis, May 28). Moreover, Sakhr was allegedly involved in the killing of Anis Jelassi, a security officer, in Fernana in December 2012, and the massacre of Tunisian troops in Jebel Chaambi in July 2013. The latter was one of the bloodiest episodes in the fight between Tunisian forces and terrorist militants in the area. After this, the Interior Ministry made Sakhr the subject of a "most-wanted" alert (Maghrabia, July 4). In July of this year, there were claims that forces close to General Khalifa Haftar of Libya had arrested Sakhr at the Tunisian-Libyan border (Yagool, June 1). A few weeks later, Tunisian authorities claimed that they arrested him in an anti-terrorist operation, but a security source later denied he had been arrested (Africa Manager, July 28).

Tunisia's Complex Transition

Tunisia is approaching a delicate phase of its political transition. Between October and November of this year, Tunisia will hold parliamentary and presidential elections. These represent a test case for the country's political elites, post-revolutionary institutions and new constitution, whose drafting process has been rather troubled and complex. The constitution is a good and pragmatic compromise, the result of months of hard and often tense negotiations. Although Tunisia remains the most politically stable of the countries that experienced revolution during the Arab Spring, its domestic political balances remain fragile. The political landscape remains, on the one hand, fragmented, with a proliferation of small parties and groups claiming a role in the post-Ben Ali era, and, on the other hand, polarized, with a clear dividing line between secular and Islamist forces. The presence of 20 officially registered candidates for the presidential elections show the degree to which the Tunisian political landscape is fragmented (Espace Manager, September 20). Moreover, within the two blocks that dominate the current Tunisian political landscape, political conflicts and rivalries are normal. For instance, Ennahda, the moderate Islamic party and key political actor in Tunisia in the post-Ben Ali era, is increasingly experiencing internal dissent over a number of issues: some more conservative groups within the party have contested the compromise reached on the constitution – criticizing, for instance, the absence of references to Shari'a in it.

The Risks for Tunisia: Local and Regional Dimensions

This is the context in which a radical group with a regional outreach is trying to transform Tunisia into a jihadi battlefield. The Tunisian authorities are increasingly worried about terrorism and have decided to raise the level of alert across the country, with a specific focus on its border regions (*La Nouvelle République* [Algiers], September 23). The approaching elections are considered a likely target for terrorist organizations (*Jeune Afrique*, Sept 19). The authorities see Katiba d'Oqba Ibn Nafaa and Abu Sakhr as major threats. Speaking at a joint press conference of the Defense and Interior ministers, spokesperson Muhammad Ali Laroui took stock of the security and military operations conducted in September:

There is reliable information confirming plans by the d'Oqba Ibn Nafaa Brigade led by very dangerous terrorist Khaled Chaïeb, a.k.a. Lokman Abu Sakhr, to target the elections and commit terrorist attacks during the period to come (Tunisia Afrique Press, September 18).

In September, the Tunisian security forces seized a significant quantity of weapons and munitions in Ben Gardane en route to Sidi Bouzid. The seized arsenal consisted of 28 homemade bombs, 30 grenades, 11 RPGs and thousands of bullets and other munitions (Global.Net Tunisia, September 5).

Moreover, although the Maghreb is geographically far from the core of the Arab world, what is happening in Syria and Iraq with the rise of the Islamic State has a number of consequences for the local geopolitical environment and the jihadist groups operating in it. For instance, the Algerian army recently engaged 15 militants along the border with Tunisia, after which the Tunisian military intervened, dispatching air force and ground units to the border (*Echorouk* [Algiers], September 18). Algeria is actively supporting Tunisia in tackling the jihadist threat. The militants are reportedly members of a group calling itself Soldiers of the Caliphate in the Land of Algeria. This group allegedly defected from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, pledging loyalty to the Islamic State and accusing AQIM of deviating from the true path (al-Jazeera, September 14). AQIM originally rejected the Islamic State's caliphate and reaffirmed allegiance to al-Qaeda and Ayman al-Zawahiri, but it seems now that a number of its units are moving toward the Islamic State (AFP, July 15). Katiba d'Oqba Ibn Nafaa has allegedly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State as well and called on all the Muslim brothers to take action to oust and destroy the tyrants (Kapitalis, September 21). However, these remain allegations. Given the significant, strong ties between Abu Sakhr and Droukdel, a sudden rupture between the two would be surprising.

Conclusion

At first glance, Lokman Abu Sakhr is similar to many AQIM militants. He is a man originally from a geographically marginal area of Algeria who turned to jihad and became a major leader thanks to his expertise in chemistry and ability to build explosive devices. He has historically had strong ties with the AQIM main leader, Abdelmalek Droukdel, and is considered one of Droukdel's most trusted and closest militants. This is why Sakhr was appointed head of a new *katiba* whose major aim was to carry out jihad in Tunisia. Like almost all the radical militants operating in the region, he is mobile and moves between Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, taking advantage of the porous borders due to the incapacity of these three countries to control their territory. He and his groups represent a significant threat to Tunisia, a country entering a very delicate phase of its post-revolutionary transition. However, the recent allegations concerning his possible allegiance to the Islamic State may partially change his operational profile. If it is true that he has switched his allegiances, Sakhr would likely try to increase his role by becoming more active in targeting not only Tunisian targets but also American and Western ones, since the Islamic State has, at least rhetorically, a strong emphasis on fighting the "far-enemies." However, these allegations should be assessed carefully and, at the moment, it is only possible to speculate about them, given the strong relationship binding Abu Sakhr to the main leader of AQIM, Abdelmalek Droukdel. A rupture and a shift would represent a major turning point in Sakhr's jihadist career.

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Rising through the Ranks: A Portrait of Jabhat al-Nusra's Abu Malik al-Shami

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Abu Malik al-Shami (a.k.a. Abu Malik al-Tala) is the commander of al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN – Victory Front) in Syria's mountainous Qalamoun region on the Syrian-Lebanese border west of Damascus. Al-Shami's faction of JN has become one of the most powerful armed opposition factions in the northern area of Lebanon's eastern Bekaa Valley, in and around the town of Aarsal. It is believed that most of the attacks against the Lebanese security forces in the Bekaa Valley are either conducted exclusively by, or coordinated by, JN forces under al-Shami's command. [1] There are reports that over 600 Salafist fighters from the northern Lebanese coastal city of Tripoli and its suburbs, as well as the northern-central Lebanese region of Akkar, have declared allegiance to al-Shami (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], July 9). Al-Shami has actively called on Lebanese Sunnis to support the Syrian rebels and to reject and confront Hezbollah. He has recently stated that JN has the ability to strike targets throughout Lebanon in defense of the Syrian and Lebanese Sunni communities (*al-Nahar* [Beirut], September 27; RIA Novosti [Moscow], September 27; Lebanese Broadcasting Company [Beirut], September 5).

Al-Shami is in his 40s and was reportedly born in Syria's western governorate of Homs, which borders Lebanon's Akkar region. He is an experienced jihadist operative who fought as a member of al-Qaeda's organization in Iraq under the command of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, conducting operations against the U.S.-led coalition and Iraqi Shi'a targets (*al-Hadath*, July 4). Prior to assuming command of JN in the Qalamoun region, Al-Shami reportedly commanded JN fighters trying to capture the Syrian city of Homs (*al-Mokhtsar* [Riyadh], March 8, 2013). Al-Shami is also believed to have been a top adviser to JN's overall commander, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, working closely with al-Julani to build the JN organization in Syria. Al-Shami reportedly served as al-Julani's envoy to the militant Salafist community in Tripoli and the Akkar, in addition to being an important liaison who coordinated the movement of Lebanese jihadists into Syria via smuggling routes in Lebanon's northern Bekaa Valley. [2]

Al-Shami supposedly maintains a close personal relationship with the leadership of the Islamic State in the Qalamoun region (*al-Safir* [Beirut], September 9). The Islamic State fighters there, numbering around 100 and believed to be

primarily Lebanese and Syrian nationals, are reportedly mainly JN fighters who declared allegiance to the leader of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, after the successful Islamic State campaigns in western Iraq and eastern Syria in June (*al-Safir* [Beirut], September 9; *al-Akhbar* [Beirut], July 9). In August, the Islamic State, in cooperation with a cadre of JN fighters based in Qalamoun, captured 22 Lebanese Army soldiers. The soldiers were captured during fighting between the Syrian armed opposition groups and Lebanese security forces in the area of Aarsal. Both militant groups participated in that battle, which resulted in the rebel factions briefly seizing control of Aarsal. Three of the captured Lebanese soldiers were executed – two by the Islamic State and one by JN (*al-Nahar* [Beirut], September 27; *The National* (Abu Dhabi), September 8). It is unclear whether al-Shami authorized the JN fighters to hold the captured Lebanese soldiers.

Aarsal, a predominately Sunni town located amid Shi'a villages that straddle the Lebanese-Syrian border, has become a major logistical site for the re-supply and recuperation of Syrian rebels fighting the Assad government in western Syria, including Damascus, Homs, and Hama. Aarsal is also a refuge for an estimated 140,000 Syrian refugees, including the families of armed opposition fighters tied to JN, the Islamic State and other militant Salafist organizations (*Daily Star* [Beirut], September 27; BBC, September 25). As a result of tensions in and around Aarsal between anti-Assad Syrian armed opposition groups and anti-Assad Lebanese sympathetic to the Syrian revolution, on the one hand, and the pro-Assad Hezbollah, on the other, Lebanon's Interior Minister Nouhad Machnouk stated that the Syrian refugee population residing there should be transferred to other regions of Lebanon (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], September 27). Aarsal is widely perceived in Lebanon as being anti-Assad and supportive of the Syrian rebels.

A joint operation by the Syrian military, Hezbollah, local Syrian military-aligned National Defense Force (NDF) militias and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated Shi'a militias in the fall of 2013 led to a significant degradation in the armed opposition's ability to utilize the Qalamoun region (*Daily Star* [Beirut], August 2; *al-Akhbar* [Beirut], March 17; *al-Arabiya* [Dubai], October 31, 2013). The pressure applied by the pro-Assad forces against the Syrian rebels in Qalamoun pushed angry anti-Hezbollah Syrian fighters out of the region into the Aarsal area, which reportedly led a number of the local fighters to join the Islamic State and JN (*Daily Star* [Beirut]; *al-Safir* [Beirut], October 18, 2013).

Al-Shami made several recorded statements in which he

asserted that JN and its allies in Qalamoun would direct attacks against Hezbollah and its Lebanese supporters, including Lebanese security forces, inside Lebanon because of the Shi'a party's military support for the al-Assad government (*al-Nahar* [Beirut], September 27; *al-Akhbar* [Beirut], July 9). Under al-Shami's leadership, JN bombed a gas station in the Shi'a-majority city of Hermel in the northern Bekaa Valley, killing four people and wounding 15. JN stated that the attack was in response to Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria in support of Assad (*al-Jazeera* [Doha], February 2). Al-Shami has also demanded that Lebanon release fighters from the militant Salafist organization Fatah al-Islam (Conquest of Islam), including Lebanese, Syrian and Saudi nationals, who are being held in Lebanon's Roumieh maximum security prison near Beirut. He vowed that JN would free the captives (*al-Nahar* [Beirut], July 8; *al-Manar* [Beirut], July 5). Lebanese soldiers held captive by JN and the Islamic State are being offered in exchange for these prisoners (*The National* (Abu Dhabi, September 8).

Although projecting the image of being a fierce opponent of Hezbollah and the Lebanese security forces that JN and its allies perceive to be subservient to Hezbollah, al-Shami has also demonstrated pragmatism by mediating the conflict between the Syrian armed opposition factions that have sought refuge in and around Arsal and Lebanese security forces in the region. Lebanese security officials have asserted that the Qalamoun branch of JN, under al-Shami's leadership, is particularly concerned not to frighten, provoke or target Lebanese Sunnis in the Arsal area. The group has also stated that it wants to provide security for the large Syrian refugee community in the area (*al-Safir* [Beirut], September 9). In early August, al-Shami negotiated the withdrawal of Syrian rebel fighters from Arsal after these fighters seized the town in response to a Lebanese military's capture of Abu Ahmad Juma, leader of the Syrian armed opposition group Fajr al-Islam (Dawn of Islam) and an important rebel commander in the Qalamoun region. Juma is believed to have strong ties with local fighters affiliated with both JN and the Islamic State (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 8; *al-Akhbar* [Beirut], August 7). Al-Shami also reportedly mediated the release of 13 nuns from the town of Maaloula who had been captured by JN fighters, an effort that required that he liaise with the Syrian military (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 8). A joint Syrian military and Hezbollah operation in September killed al-Shami's deputy, Malak al-Tall, who was suspected of being responsible for the nuns' abduction (*Daily Star* [Beirut], September 3).

Al-Shami is an important leader within JN who has assumed command over the branch of the organization best situated to attack Hezbollah and its allies, which are viewed as an

extension of the Assad regime in Lebanon. Were a large-scale sectarian conflict exacerbated by the Syrian civil war to break out in Lebanon, al-Shami's network of Lebanese militants would likely be among the most active and committed combatants in such a conflict. Under al-Shami's command, JN's organization in the Qalamoun has shown a willingness to bridge ideological differences with rebel factions ranging from the Islamic State to the Free Syrian Army in order to coordinate joint operations, such as the battle against the Lebanese military in Arsal in early August. Although JN's operational capacity in the Qalamoun region may currently be constrained by the counter-insurgency campaign waged by Hezbollah, the Syrian military, NDF militias and the Lebanese military, JN and its allies continue to function in a strategic area that includes key logistical routes into and out of western Syria. Assuming he survives, and the Syrian armed opposition is able to launch an effective offensive against Damascus, al-Shami's JN organization and its allies would likely be well-placed to pressure the Syrian capital by attacking Assad's forces around the city from the west, and to be a core component of the rebel force that would seek to cut off the Assad government's escape routes to the north and west of Damascus.

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Notes

1. Author's interview with an anonymous Lebanese military special forces NCO who is frequently deployed to the Bekaa Valley. Interview conducted via Skype on September 22, 2014.
2. *Ibid.*