

MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

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ABU ABD ALLAH AL-SHAMI: A LEADING SALAFIST MILITANT COMMANDER IN SYRIA

Nicholas A. Heras

The Islamist rebel campaign Jaysh al-Fateh (Conquering Army) has begun an operation called *Ma'arakat al-Nasr* (Battle of Victory) in order to seize control of the strategic town of Jisr al-Shughur in the northwestern Syrian governorate of Idlib, near the Turkish border ([al-Hayat](#), April 24; [al-Sharq al-Awsat](#), April 23; [al-Jazeera](#), April 23; [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), March 2015). One of Jaysh al-Fateh's allies in the operation is Jabhat Ansar al-Din (Partisans of Religion Front), an umbrella organization of three constituent Salafist jihadist armed groups with a large foreign fighter composition that is "neutral" in the conflict between Jabhat al-Nusra (JN—Victory Front) and the Islamic State and is seeking to overthrow the al-Assad government and implement a Shari'a state ([El-Nashra](#) [Idlib], April 23; [al-Quds al-Arabi](#), March 8). The most important Syrian jihadist organization within Jabhat Ansar al-Din is Harakat Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiya (Movement of the Dawn of the Islamic Levant).

Doctor Muhammad Hassan (a.k.a. Abu Abd Allah al-Shami) leads Harakat Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiya and is also a deputy commander of Jabhat Ansar al-Din. He is a native of Jabal Badro, a northeastern district of Aleppo city. Prior to the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, he was an inmate in the Saidnaya prison, where a number of prominent militant Islamist Syrian activists were held by Syrian security forces. Al-Shami and many others became prominent rebel fighters and leaders after they were released in June 2011 as part of an early al-Assad government effort to appease the nascent opposition movement ([al-Malaf](#) [Aleppo], March 9; [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), November 2013).



Ibrahim bin Suleiman al-Rubaish was a key religious official for AQAP, who was recently killed in a drone strike.

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When al-Shami established Harakat Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiya in the western suburbs of Aleppo city in 2012, he intended the organization to serve as the nucleus of a Syrian jihadist movement that sought to overthrow Alawite control over the Syrian state and to establish a Salafist regime based on Shari'a that can serve as "the focus of the hope of the Muslims on the planet Earth" ([al-Malaf](#) [Aleppo], March 9; [Hibr Press](#) [Aleppo], November 7, 2014; [Zaman al-Wasl](#) [Aleppo], March 11, 2014). The organization, although not the largest militant Salafist faction operating in the Aleppo battle space, is believed to have more than 1,500 fighters, the majority of whom are Syrians from Aleppo governorate, and it has been an active combatant in several areas in and around the city of Aleppo, in addition to Idlib, Latakia and Hama governorates ([Hibr Press](#) [Aleppo], November 7, 2014; [Zaman al-Wasl](#) [Aleppo], March 11, 2014). [1] Harakat Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiya was featured at length in a 2014 documentary on developments in the conflict for control over Aleppo, during which its status as a frontline fighting force against the al-Assad government, its incorporation of foreign jihadists and its relationship with local, Aleppo-based Islamist opposition activists were highlighted ([Vice News](#), March 21, 2014).

Under al-Shami's leadership, Harakat Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiya was a founding member of Jabhat al-Islamiya al-Sooria (Syrian Islamic Front—SIF), the first prominent militant Islamist Syrian rebel umbrella organization and the predecessor to Jabhat al-Islamiya (Islamic Front —IF). Al-Shami has sought to position Harakat Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiya as a "neutral" Islamist faction that avoids bloodshed with its ideological peers ([al-Malaf](#) [Aleppo], March 9; [Hibr Press](#) [Aleppo], November 7, 2014; [3arabi Online](#) [Aleppo], April 6, 2014; [al-Hayat](#), December 22, 2012; [YouTube](#), December 21, 2012). After leaving SIF, purportedly due to disputes with SIF's leading faction—Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya (Islamic Movement of the Free Ones of the Levant)—over the division of the spoils of war and what Abu Abd Allah al-Shami has referred to as "administrative difficulties," Harakat Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiya has cooperated in a number of armed opposition campaigns in Aleppo, including with Jabhat al-Nusra, before joining Jabhat Ansar al-Din in 2014 ([al-Malaf](#) [Aleppo], March 9; [Halab News](#) [Aleppo], February 7, 2014; [Zaman al-Wasl](#) [Aleppo], March 11, 2014; [YouTube](#), January 11, 2013).

Jabhat Ansar al-Din has a large number of foreign Salafist jihadists in its ranks. The organization's overall leader is Salah al-Din al-Shishani, and al-Shishani's fighting group, Jaysh al-Muhajareen wal-Ansar (Army of the Emigrants and Partisans), is composed predominately of Chechen and Caucasian fighters and has also incorporated a number of Saudi jihadist fighters from the group Kateeba al-Khudra

(Green Battalion) ([al-Malaf](#) [Aleppo], March 9; [YouTube](#), October 3, 2014; [YouTube](#), July 25, 2014; [al-Akhbar](#) [Beirut], March 1, 2014; [Islam Times](#), August 30, 2013; [Terrorism Monitor](#), April 19, 2013). In addition to its close operational relationship with the foreign jihadist fighters who comprise the majority of the combatants within the overall structure of Jabhat Ansar al-Din, Harakat Fajar al-Sham al-Islamiya is also reported to have incorporated Central Asian jihadists into its ranks, including Afghans, a process that is encouraged by Abu Abd Allah al-Shami in order to unify foreign and local jihadist fighters ([al-Malaf](#) [Aleppo], March 21, 2014; [Vice News](#), March 21, 2014; [Zaman al-Wasl](#) [Aleppo], March 11, 2014).

Abu Abd Allah al-Shami is believed to be an important adviser to Salah al-Din al-Shishani on building relationships with Syrian Salafist fighters and in reaching out to local Syrian communities. [2] Recently, al-Shami has threatened to commit Harakat Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiya against U.S. intervention in the Syrian conflict, denounced U.S. airstrikes and stated that the United States is seeking the preservation of the Syrian (i.e. Ba'athist) state in order to support a Western occupation of Syria ([Aleppo Media Center](#), September 21, 2014; [El-Dorar](#) [Beirut], September 20, 2014). He maintains an active Twitter account where he typically lectures on good conduct under Shari'a for Harakat Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiya fighters and supporters. [3]

Al-Shami is one of the leading militant Salafist commanders in the Syrian civil war, especially as the operational intensity of Jabhat Ansar al-Din increases in key battle spaces such as Aleppo, Idlib and Latakia. As one of the Syrian Salafist rebel leaders who is allied and actively working with thousands of foreign jihadists, al-Shami's organization is an important node in the international network of foreign fighters seeking to fight in Syria. Like Salah al-Din al-Shishani, Abu Abd Allah al-Shami's desire to remain as neutral as possible in the internecine Salafist jihadist conflict between JN and its allies and the Islamic State makes him an important "swing" commander among the Salafist jihadist movement fighting inside of Syria

Notes

1. Harakat Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiya maintains a regularly updated Twitter site that chronicles its participation in various fronts throughout northwestern Syria. The site can be found at: <https://twitter.com/islamicfajer>; Skype interviews with Syrian activists from the city of Aleppo and its neighboring suburbs that are based in the southern Turkish city of Gaziantep and who travel frequently to the area of Aleppo, interview conducted on April 17, 2015 and

April 19, 2015.

2. Skype interviews with Syrian activists, *op. cit.*
3. For Abu Abd Allah al-Shami's Twitter account, see: <https://twitter.com/alhakemalhabe8>.

ISLAMIC STATE'S SAUDI CLERIC: ANAS BIN ALI BIN ABDUL AZIZ AL-NASHWAN

Nicholas A. Heras

In April, fighters from the Islamic State beheaded 30 Ethiopian Christian workers that it had kidnapped in Libya ([al-Jazeera](#), April 19). Shaykh Anas bin Ali bin Abdul Aziz al-Nashwan (a.k.a. Abu Malik al-Tamimi al-Najdi), a leading interpreter of Shari'a in the Islamic State organization, provided commentary in support of these executions ([al-Aalem](#) [Baghdad], April 23). He asserted that the Ethiopian Christians, like Iraqi Christians in Mosul and surrounding areas, were killed by the Islamic State because they refused to convert to Islam or pay *jizya* (tax) ([YouTube](#), April 21).

A native of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, al-Nashwan studied at the Institute for Imam of Da'wa Science and graduated from the Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh with a degree in interpreting Shari'a ([Sawt Beirut](#), April 21; [YouTube](#), April 21; [YouTube](#), April 19). Al-Nashwan was offered a position as a state-sanctioned *qadi* (judge of Shari'a) in the Saudi Ministry of Justice, which he rejected in order to wage jihad in Afghanistan ([Sawt Beirut](#), April 21; [YouTube](#), April 21; [al-Watan](#) [Riyadh], January 10, 2011). As a supporter of jihad in Afghanistan against the Coalition and Afghan forces, al-Nashwan had also delivered public lectures in Saudi Arabia to recruit Saudi fighters for al-Qaeda's organization in Afghanistan ([Elaph](#), June 26, 2014; [YouTube](#), February 9, 2011).

Al-Nashwan left Saudi Arabia in late 2009 or early 2010 to join al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. While there, he was appointed to a top post as an interpreter of Shari'a in Kunar and Nuristan provinces before leaving al-Qaeda and Afghanistan to join the Islamic State ([YouTube](#), April 21; [al-Alam](#) [Riyadh], April 20; [YouTube](#), April 19; [al-Wasat](#) [Manama], September 5, 2014). In January 2011, the Saudi Interior Ministry published a list of its 47 most-wanted Saudi nationals who had been jihadist fighters abroad and were suspected of attempting to establish al-Qaeda cells inside the Kingdom; al-Nashwan was prominently listed as the third most-wanted individual on the list ([As-Sakina](#), January 25, 2014; [al-Riyadh](#), January 10, 2011; [al-Youm](#) [Riyadh], January 9, 2011).

Al-Nashwan is believed to have arrived in Raqqa from Afghanistan in June 2014, after which he pledged *baya'a* (allegiance) to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and assumed his jurisprudent position within the Islamic State organization ([Sawt Beirut](#), April 21; [al-Wasat](#) [Manama], September 5, 2014; [Elaph](#), June 26, 2014). Al-Nashwan is the author of a popular jihadist e-book entitled "The Jihadists' Guide to the Most Important Provisions on the Apostate in Religion," in which he calls on young Muslims to wage jihad in areas including Syria, Iraq, Mali, Afghanistan, Nigeria and Somalia, and details his interpretation of Shari'a that justifies the execution of "apostates" ([Elaph](#), June 26, 2014). Considered a mujahid shaykh who fights in addition to preaching, al-Nashwan's defection from the al-Qaeda organization to join the Islamic State is believed to be an important coup legitimizing the Islamic State model for a rising generation of jihadists ([Sawt Beirut](#), April 21; [YouTube](#), April 19; [Elaph](#), June 26, 2014).

Al-Nashwan has the potential to be an important figure within the Islamic State, especially for attracting Saudi jihadists and providing a counter-narrative to Saudi attempts to undermine the religious credentials of the Islamic State's Shari'a administration. As a Saudi cleric who was trained in the Wahhabi tradition of his country and who rejected a potentially comfortable career path in the state-sanctioned Shari'a jurisprudence hierarchy, al-Nashwan's rejection of Saudi Arabia's ruling clerical establishment and his defection from al-Qaeda to the Islamic State could have powerful symbolic value for the latter organization. The symbolic power of his active participation in the Islamic State's self-declared caliphate could be particularly magnified as international jihadists decide whether to fight under the banner of the Islamic State or its rivals in the militant Salafist movement, such as Jabhat al-Nusra.

A Post-Mortem Profile of Egyptian Jihadist Leader Hamam Mohamed Attiya

Muhammad Mansour

In a televised speech, Egyptian Interior Ministry spokesperson Major Gen Hani Abdel Latif announced on April 5 that the jihadist leader of Afnad Misr (Soldiers of Egypt), Hamam Mohamed Ahmad Ali Attiya (a.k.a. Majid al-Din al-Masri), was shot to death during an exchange of fire with security forces: “As soon as the terrorist felt the security forces were surrounding him, he initiated shooting at them. The [bullets] riddled him and caused his death” ([YouTube](#), April 5). Following the shootout, security forces confiscated around 24 explosive charges, four of them ready for use in terrorist operations, at Attiya’s apartment in Giza province, located on the west bank of the Nile, southwest of central Cairo.

Attiya, as a prominent terrorist, represents a good catch for Egypt’s security forces. Yet his death is ultimately symbolic: police morale will rise since several police officers were killed by Attiya’s explosive charges, but his death does not mean that the group has been dismantled or that their extremist ideology, which probably came in response to the anti-Islamic policy adopted by the Sisi government, has been delegitimized. Moreover, unlike other hierarchical organizations, the Afnad Misr is a combination of cells based on recruiting embattled religious youth from disadvantaged communities where the group is located. Giza Governorate, in particular, is known for its slums, which form a fertile environment for the proliferation of Islamic cells.

Attiya

33-year-old Attiya founded Afnad Misr in August 2013, and his group says its attacks are “retribution” for the August 2013 Rabaa Massacre, where security forces violently cleared out a pro-Mursi sit-in that had lasted for six weeks. According to Egyptian Health Ministry estimates and the Forensic Authority, around 627 people were killed, of which 595 were civilians and 43 police officers, with at least 3,994 injured ([al-Ahram](#) [Cairo], November 15, 2013). Egyptian security forces issued a statement on April 5 identifying Attiya as “one of prominent leaders of the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis organization before splitting away in 2013 and founding what is called Afnad Misr” ([al-Jazeera Mubasher](#), April 5). “He was involved in forming several organizational cells, preparing and training the group’s members in the know-how of manufacturing explosive charges,” the statement

added.

Since his death, there have been several reports in Egyptian media regarding Attiya’s earlier life. However, these are unconfirmed and probably politically motivated. Attiya allegedly grew up in France but left when he was young. He also received training in terrorist camps in Afghanistan. According to former assistant interior minister Gamal Abo Zekri:

The targeted terrorist has long experience participating in terrorist operations in Afghanistan and Syria. He has returned back to Egypt during Mursi’s tenure, and he was in direct contact with aides of Osama bin Laden. The security apparatus has been chasing him since his arrival ([Mada Misr](#) [Cairo], April 6).

Afnad Misr

According to Abdel Latif, “Afnad Misr carried out around 26 terrorist attacks,” in 16 months, all of which targeted policemen stationed in Cairo and Giza provinces ([YouTube](#), April 5). The group’s strategy is based on planting primitive explosive charges that have killed a number of police officials, including high-ranking officers, on an almost monthly basis. Egypt’s national security apparatus supposedly extracted information about Attiya’s hideout after arresting a member of the group who had planted an explosive charge at the premises of the High Court in Cairo last month, wounding several policemen ([BBC Arabic](#), April 5).

Unlike Sinai-based Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis—which changed its name to Wilayat Sinai (State of Sinai) after pledging allegiance to the Islamic State last November—Afnad Misr is centered in the suburbs of Cairo and Giza. Therefore, they target the police, not the army as in Sinai, as it is easier for them to hit law enforcement personnel than military forces.

Attiya’s Death

On April 9, Afnad Misr confirmed the death of its leader via Twitter and announced that the group had appointed a successor: “The Afnad Misr Shura council assembled and appointed the leader Izz al-Din al-Masri as a successor to Majid al-Din al-Masri” ([al-Watan](#) [Cairo] April 9). The group’s media division, al-Kinana Foundation, originally posted this to Twitter on April 9. The statement also claimed that the April 5 bombing on the May 15 Bridge in Cairo came as a “quick response” to the killing of Attiya. In the post, the group hailed Majid al-Din as a martyr who “would refuse to see the Muslims in humiliation or defeat,” adding that “he thundered against the Crusaders in Iraq and he fought the

cursed Zionists in Sinai.”

Attiya’s final post-mortem report from the forensic authority has not yet been released, but investigations conducted by the national security apparatus concluded that Attiya was “the plotter of the killing of Brigadier General Tareq al-Mergawi” on March 5, 2014 ([Akhabar al-Youm](#) [Cairo], April 5). Afnan Misr claimed responsibility for al-Mergawi’s assassination in a statement on Twitter, stating that he was targeted for his involvement in the “killing of innocents, trespassing of honors and participation in the Nahda massacre.” Other Afnan Misr attacks under Attiya included the April 2014 bombing of Lebanon Square and the assassination of General Ahmad Zaki by car bomb ([Al-Monitor](#), July 3, 2014).

Conclusion

Killing the leader of Afnan Misr signals successful efforts by the police in clamping down on one of the prominent terrorist organizations in Egypt. The latest police campaign is likely to break the morale of the group for a while. However, Attiya’s death is not going to end the group’s operations, therefore, this security strategy alone will not dismantle the extremist infrastructure in Egypt. More investigative efforts are required to find the group’s hideouts and financial backers as well as to cut off recruitment approaches and finally fight the extremist ideology, which appeals to youth in disadvantaged communities.

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

Losuba Wongo: The Newest Rebel Commander in South Sudan

Brian Adeba

An attack on South Sudan’s military in a relatively peaceful part of the country in January of this year propelled a hitherto unknown army officer, Major Losuba Wongo, into the limelight in Africa’s newest state. Six soldiers were allegedly killed in the attack and several others wounded, according to a statement signed by Wongo after the assault on January 27 near the town of Maridi in Western Equatoria State. [1] Although local government authorities attributed the attack to bandits, they also acknowledged that Wongo had defected from the South Sudanese Army some time earlier with some troops ([Sudan Tribune](#), January 29). Wongo said the attack, which he personally commanded, marked the official launch of a new rebellion called the Revolutionary Movement for National Salvation (REMNASAs), which was formed by disgruntled army officers in order to dislodge the South Sudanese president, Salva Kiir, from power (VOA, January 28). REMNASAs is merely the latest insurgency in Africa’s newest country to challenge President Kiir’s increasingly authoritarian rule, but Wongo’s grievances mirror those of the country at large, giving him and the movement additional legitimacy.

Background

Wongo, who is either in his late 30s or early 40s, hails from the Kakwa tribe, which is also found in neighboring Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). [2] He was among a new generation of young and educated professionals that the South Sudanese Army recruited to help transform the country’s military into a modern, nimble, conventional and professional organization. [3] According to his LinkedIn profile, Wongo worked with nonprofit organizations prior to joining the army, which he did most likely after 2005 ([LinkedIn](#)). He holds a master’s degree from the University of Liverpool in the United Kingdom and a bachelor’s degree from the Uganda Martyrs University. At South Sudan’s Ministry of Defense, he was initially the director of research in the directorate of policy, planning and research. Here, he made quite an impression on Kuol Manyang Jook, South Sudan’s defense minister, who described him as “well-mannered and highly disciplined.” This resulted in a transfer to Jook’s office, where Wongo was appointed director of administration ([Sudan Tribune](#), January 30).

Since its birth in 2011, after a referendum that separated it from Sudan, South Sudan has been plagued by a plethora

of armed rebellions, fostered in part by exclusionist policies at the center. It is within this context that insurgent leaders like Wongo find expression. Wongo's quarrel with the South Sudanese government centers on a list of familiar grievances: rampant corruption, poor infrastructure and lack of services provided by the government. Other rebel groups, including the ongoing 14-month-old insurgency led by former vice president Riek Machar, have also voiced these concerns. By focusing on these grievances, Wongo is appealing to popular sentiment in a country where nearly every development indicator is abysmal.

Wongo's first statement to the media after the alleged attack is also a treatise on why he took up arms. He distanced REMNAsA from the Machar-led rebels in the north and northeast of the country, stressing that the only commonality between the two groups is that they are fighting the same enemy (VOA, January 28). The Machar-led rebellion was born in the wake of a power struggle in the ruling political party pitting him against President Kiir ([Security Sector Reform](#), December 18, 2013). Taking stock of the general political environment in South Sudan, Wongo denounced an ongoing regional peace initiative to bridge differences between the South Sudan government and the Machar-led rebels as being all about power-sharing among members of the same political party rather than addressing the fundamental fault lines in the country, such as poor governance, ethnic divides, dictatorship, nepotism and human rights abuses. Summing up REMNAsA's objectives, Wongo said the movement aims to create an equal, free, democratic and prosperous South Sudan. In an interview with the Voice of America's "South Sudan in Focus" radio program, he suggested that this would be a "long struggle" (VOA, January 28).

REMNAsA

The REMNAsA rebellion is unique for a couple of reasons. First, unlike other insurgent groups that originated in the traditional rebel corridor in the Greater Upper Nile region in the north of the country, REMNAsA was born in the Greater Equatoria region, a relatively peaceful area in the south of the country, from which no rebel group has emerged since South Sudan's independence in 2011. [4] In contrast, the oil-rich Greater Upper Nile region, a vast swath of territory that borders Sudan in the north and Ethiopia in the east, has been wracked by violence since 2011. Also, proximity to Sudan, South Sudan's arch-enemy to the north, has facilitated Khartoum's arming of rebel groups opposed to Juba ([New African](#) [London], April 2). The availability of oil has made the Greater Upper Nile region highly contested among political actors. In that regard, the region has been restive, plagued by a persistent rebel insurgency, the wide availability

of small arms and cattle rustling which has devastated its entirely pastoralist communities.

Secondly, that a rebel group has emerged in the Greater Equatoria region represents an escalation in the level of disillusionment with the government. Since the outbreak of war in December 2013, President Kiir has consolidated more powers in his hands. In March, parliament extended his term for three more years without an election ([Reuters](#), March 24). A recently-passed contentious security bill gave the intelligence service powers to arrest and detain dissidents without trial ([Radio Tamazuj](#), March 16). The media is heavily censored and political dissent is not tolerated; journalists are subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention, newspaper editions are seized from their printing presses and radio stations have been shut down without court orders (VOA, February 16). Nearly half a million South Sudanese are internally displaced and the country faces a looming famine (IPS, January 24). In addition, the government is unable to reign in high inflation. As a result, senior government and military officials have defected to join the Machar rebels. [5] This growing dissatisfaction with the government may result in more recruits joining REMNAsA's ranks as well.

Wongo defected with a relatively small force that by his own account is slightly more than 200 soldiers (VOA, January 28). REMNAsA's small size essentially means that the group's military activities may be limited for the time being. So far, in the three months since it was born, REMNAsA claims to have officially launched two attacks against government troops, both of which were ambushes. This means that REMNAsA does not control any territory. The government may attempt to stamp out the rebellion, but the start of the rainy season in April may work in REMNAsA's favor because roads will become impassable, limiting the ability of the government to move armor and troops in order to respond to attacks.

Conclusion

Currently, Wongo's theater of operation is in central Maridi County, far from any international borders. Although he has stated that his troops are on the move, he declined to mention the location where they may be proceeding. For logistical and strategic reasons, rebel groups in South Sudan prefer to locate near borders. Wongo himself is from Morobo County, which borders Uganda and the DRC, giving him deep knowledge of the area, including cross border contacts. The South Sudanese government previously tapped into this when DRC authorities asked for South Sudan's help to diffuse an ethnic Kakwa rebellion in that country in 2012. Through Wongo's help, the situation was resolved amicably

([Sudan Tribune](#), January 30). It remains to be seen whether Wongo will again exploit this knowledge and move his troops southwest to a location he is familiar with to continue his fight against the South Sudanese government.

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Notes

1. Press statement sent to author by REMNASA.
2. Author's personal knowledge of the individual and region.
3. Phone interview with a source that previously worked with him.
4. There are three states in the Greater Upper Nile: Unity, Jongolei and Upper Nile. The same applies in Greater Equatoria, which is divided into Eastern Equatoria State, Central Equatoria State and Western Equatoria State.
5. These include General Dau Atorjong, former commander of the army's sixth division in Northern Bahr El Ghazel State; Major General Martin Kenyi; Brigadier General Gabriel Gatwech Puoch Mar, chief administrator of the army's fifth division in Western Bahr el Ghazal State; and Khamis Abdel-Latif Kachuol, director general of South Sudan Television ([Sudan Tribune](#), August 3, 2014; [GAPDAM](#), January 31; [Nyamilepedia](#), April 10; [Sudan Tribune](#), January 24).

A Look Back at the Life and Times of AQAP's Mufti Shaykh Ibrahim bin Suleiman al-Rubaish

Ludovico Carlino

While al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) continues to make inroads in south Yemen in the midst of a worsening civil war and the Saudi-led military campaign in support of beleaguered President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, the group suffered another blow with the death of its second high-level member this year alone. On April 14, AQAP announced the death of its *mufti* (senior Islamic scholar), Shaykh Ibrahim bin Suleiman al-Rubaish, in a U.S. drone strike on April 12 in Hadramawt province, one of the group's strongholds in the country ([Twitter](#), April 14; [Khaleej Times](#), April 14; [Yemen News Gazette](#), April 15; [al-Jazeera](#), April 15). Al-Rubaish's death follows the killing of the group's senior Shari'a official, Harith bin Ghazi al-Nadhari, killed by another U.S. UAV strike that took place in southern Shabwah province on January 31 ([Militant Leadership Monitor](#), March 2015). This second raid in such a short period suggests that despite recent AQAP territorial gains in southern Yemen, its ability to exploit the worsening security situation in the country and the absence of a ground fighting force able to challenge its gradual takeover of territory, the group and its leaders remain vulnerable to precision airstrikes.

From Saudi Arabia to Afghanistan and Yemen: al-Rubaish's Militant Path

Al-Rubaish, whose real name is Ibrahim Sulayman Muhammad Arbaysh, was born in 1979 in al-Buraidah, Saudi Arabia. In his hometown, he received a bachelor's degree in Islamic Law from the Muhammad bin Saud University ([al-Masry al-Youm](#), August 18, 2014). The martyrdom statement released by AQAP portrays al-Rubaish as a "committed jihadi scholar" since his early studies and as a man who spent nearly two decades of his life as a mujahid "for the sake of Allah striking America and its agents" ([Twitter](#), April 14). The biographical account claims that around April 2001, al-Rubaish left Saudi Arabia for Afghanistan, where he ended up joining al-Qaeda and the Taliban movement. A Joint Task Force Guantanamo (JTF-GTMO) threat assessment, dated November 2005, reported that al-Rubaish was convinced to join and fight with al-Qaeda by a *fatwa* (religious edict) issued by Salafist Saudi cleric, Shaykh Hamoud al-Uqla. Al-Rubaish's travel to Afghanistan via Pakistan was facilitated by a Saudi-based al-Qaeda recruiter and facilitator, Abd al-Rahim, who al-Rubaish met in the Arbaysh Mosque in al-

Buraidah. In Afghanistan, al-Rubaish attended al-Qaeda's famous al-Farouq training camp prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks (*New York Times*, January 14). According to the biography published by AQAP, he also took part in the Battle for Tora Bora in December 2001. Later that month, he was arrested by Pakistani security forces along the border while attempting to leave Afghanistan (*Awraqpress*, April 14). He was turned over to U.S. authorities and transferred to the Guantanamo Bay detention center, where he remained in custody for five years (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 14; *al-Jazeera*, April 15).

In 2006, al-Rubaish was released from Guantanamo and transferred back to his native Saudi Arabia, where he took part in the Saudi government de-radicalization program for jihadists (*al-Tagheer*, December 24, 2014; *al-Alam*, April 15). According to a news report, after the rehabilitation program, al-Rubaish decided to obtain a master's degree in Islamic Law in Saudi Arabia, but he suddenly disappeared. He resurfaced in 2009 with a group of other former jihadist detainees in Yemen, where he most likely played a central role in the establishment of the nascent AQAP group (*al-Jazeera*, April 15). Indeed, AQAP was set up that year by merging al-Qaeda's Saudi and Yemeni branches (*al-Jazeera*, January 28, 2009). After leaving the kingdom, Saudi authorities added al-Rubaish to the Kingdom's list of most-wanted individuals (*al-Masry al-Youm*, August 18, 2014).

Al-Rubaish's Role Within AQAP

The U.S. State Department added al-Rubaish to its list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists in December 2014 (*U.S. Department of State*, December 18, 2014). In the designation, the State Department described al-Rubaish as "a senior leader of AQAP," who "serves as a senior advisor for AQAP operational planning and is involved in the planning of attacks." The designation also portrayed al-Rubaish "as the senior AQAP Shari'a official since 2013," stating that "in that capacity he provides the justification for attacks conducted by AQAP." Yemeni media has often portrayed al-Rubaish as a senior group commander, AQAP's theological guide and as the group's *mufti* (*al-Tagheer*, December 24, 2014; *al-Mashhad al-Yemeni*, April 14; *Hadhramaut News*; April 14).

The emphasis on al-Rubaish's religious credentials is also clearly evident from the AQAP martyrdom statement and his own prolific production of religious pamphlets, in which he has extensively blamed the Saudi monarchy for suppressing Islamist movements (*Yemen Press*, April 1, 2014; *al-Tagheer*, December 24, 2014). AQAP presented al-Rubaish's "religious knowledge" as a "pillar among the pillars of the jihad in the Arabian Peninsula" and praised "besides his military work,

his efforts in constructing, reforming, advising, leading and teaching" jihad. Most importantly, AQAP also gave him direct credit for having prevented the group from "deviating from the path of righteous jihad to extremism and negligence," an indirect reference to al-Rubaish's constant efforts to religiously support al-Qaeda against the Islamic State's challenge to its authority.

Alongside some of the most relevant jihadist scholars today, such as Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada al-Filistini and his former AQAP companion al-Nadhari, al-Rubaish has been one of the most prolific voices to question on theological grounds the Islamic State's decision to declare a caliphate and to criticize its refusal to abide by al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's orders (*al-Sharq.com*, August 14, 2014). On July 9, 2014, shortly after the rift between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda became public, al-Rubaish released a video stating that "disrespecting the old jihadist scholars," in reference to the jihadist ideologues criticized by the Islamic State for not having supported its caliphate, was among the "most serious calamities experienced by jihadists today." [1] The video also featured al-Nadhari implicitly reiterating AQAP loyalty to al-Qaeda's leadership, suggesting that the two figures had been central in shaping the group's ideological stance following the Islamic State's rise.

Although al-Rubaish probably did not reach the same level of prominence as al-Nadhari among the global jihadist audience, his reputation as an ideological point of reference resonated well beyond AQAP circles. Since his death, almost all the major jihadist groups across North Africa and the Middle East, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Shabaab, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Libyan Ansar al-Shari'a, have paid tribute to al-Rubaish by releasing eulogy statements. [2]

Conclusion

Al-Rubaish's killing represents a powerful blow to AQAP morale at a time in which the group seems to be enjoying a freedom of maneuver that might herald further jihadists advances in south Yemen. Particularly in Hadramawt province, AQAP is successfully coopting a number of local Sunni tribes hostile to the Shi'a-Zaidi Houthi territorial gains across Yemen and exploiting the worsening security situation to its advantage. On April 2, AQAP militants launched a coordinated assault on al-Mukalla, the provincial capital of Hadramawt, reportedly releasing an estimated 300 detainees from the city's central prison, including its senior commander Khaled Batarfi and around 150 former group members, raided a number of army camps and government offices and looted the local branch of the Yemeni Central

Bank, from which they stole approximately \$85 million (Barakish, April 2; Barakish, April 2; al-Watanye, April 2). On April 16, AQAP militants, backed by tribesmen from the Hadramawt National Council, also captured al-Riyan airport and the Air Defense 190 Brigade's headquarters near al-Mukalla (Barakish, April 16).

These AQAP gains indicate how the collapse of the Yemeni Army is enabling the group to increase its operational capabilities and show how the lack of any effective fighting force able to confront the group might facilitate an expansion of AQAP operations in other southern provinces by further building and exploiting tribal alliances. However, the UAV strike that killed al-Rubaish also indicates that the United States still retains accurate intelligence in the area as well as the ability to attack designated high-value targets. This was further confirmed on April 21, when another suspected U.S. strike killed five AQAP militants travelling in a car on the outskirts of al-Mukalla (Barakish, April 22). As AQAP continues to pursue its strategy of capturing more territory in Yemen and consequently operate more openly, this will make the group and its leadership more vulnerable to further U.S. airstrikes. Nevertheless, a military approach exclusively relying on airstrikes is highly unlikely to tip the balance on the ground and prevent AQAP from becoming one of the main beneficiaries of the ongoing Yemeni civil war. In the same vein, the killing of al-Rubaish, which deprives AQAP of a senior figure and further decimates the organization's leadership, will not have a crucial impact on a group that was able to regenerate following several previous military offensives and aerial campaigns.

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Notes

1. The video, which has since been taken down, was posted to YouTube.
2. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's eulogy for al-Rubaish can be viewed at https://justpaste.it/Ibrahim_Al-Rubaish; al-Shabaab's eulogy can be viewed at <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/CCuMKHiUsAAedDq.jpg>; Jabhat al-Nusra' eulogy can be viewed at <https://justpaste.it/kjpg>; and Ansar al-Shari'a's eulogy can be viewed at <https://justpaste.it/koqd>.

From Jemaah Islamiya to Islamic State: Marwan's Mission Ends in Mindanao

Jacob Zenn

In June 2011, Militant Leadership Monitor profiled the Malaysian-born and U.S. educated veteran of the 1990s civil war in Afghanistan, Zulkifli bin Hir (a.k.a. Marwan). In 2011, he was considered to be the highest-ranking of the estimated 20-30 Jemaah Islamiya (JI) fighters in the Philippines. Less than one year after the article was published, in February 2012, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) carried out an airstrike on a training camp in Sulu, Mindanao where Marwan and Muawiyah—an ex-Singaporean military officer of Indian descent involved in the 2002 Bali bombings with Marwan—were hiding (*Interaksyon*, February 16, 2012). Though Marwan and Muawiyah were initially reported as killed, it later became clear that Marwan had survived. He was killed, however, three years later on a farm in Mindanao. In February 2015, an FBI test of the DNA of Marwan's finger confirmed this when it found a match with his brother, Rahmat, a U.S. citizen who has been in prison since 2007 for “contributing goods and services to a Specially Designated Global Terrorist”—Marwan (*U.S. Department of Justice*, August 3, 2007; *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, January 30).

After his near death in 2012, Marwan used his new lease on life for the next three years to build relationships among jihadists in the Philippines and shift their orientation from al-Qaeda to the Islamic State. His efforts, in turn, played a role in Southeast Asia becoming an area under the influence of the Islamic State (*Straits Times*, March 5). Southeast Asia's shift towards Islamic State, in turn, has played a role in Islamic State's overall upending of al-Qaeda as the vanguard of the international jihadist movement.

This profile of Marwan reflects on the operation that led to his confirmed death in February 2015 and the web of jihadist networks with which he associated.

Early Life

Marwan was born in the town of Muar, in peninsular Malaysia's Johor State, in 1966. He may have been influenced to embark on a career in terrorism early on in life by his family members. Marwan's elder brother, Rahmat Abdkhir (a.k.a. Sean Kasim; Sean Kalimin), is a naturalized U.S. citizen who lived in San Jose, California and studied computer science in the United States. Rahmat was arrested

by FBI agents at his place of employment in Sunnyvale, California in 2007 on charges that included “contributing goods and services to a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (Marwan)” (U.S. Department of Justice, August 3, 2007).

Marwan’s younger brother, Taufik bin Abdul Halim (a.k.a. Dani), is in an Indonesian prison serving a life sentence for terrorism charges. In 2002, he botched the bombing of a Christian prayer group in the Atrium Shopping Mall in Jakarta. He placed a bomb in a cardboard Dunkin’ Donuts box, but it exploded prematurely as Taufik was carrying it into the mall, costing him one of his legs (*New Straits Times* [Kuala Lumpur], May 7, 2011).

During his time in secondary school at Sekolah Datuk Abdul Razak in Seremban from 1979 to 1983, Marwan earned a reputation among his fellow students for being a jihadist sympathizer (*Zambo Times*, June 6, 2007). Many of the details of Marwan’s life from 1983 to 1989—the years following his graduation from secondary school—are unclear. However, during that time he is believed to have studied engineering in the United States and may have received bomb-making training under the tutelage of JI explosives expert Dr. Azahari Hussin, who was killed in 2005 by Indonesian anti-terrorism police. Those learning experiences helped to propel Marwan’s later career as an explosives master.

Marwan first engaged in jihad overseas in 1989 when he traveled to Afghanistan to join the mujahideen fighting alongside Bin Laden. From 1989 to 1992, he was deployed to a combat zone to defuse remaining Soviet ordinance and landmines and recycle them for use by the mujahideen (*Zambo Times*, June 6, 2007).

After Marwan returned to Malaysia in 1992, he began working as a district engineer in a local council. At that same time, he was the leader of a Malaysian JI cell and helped to found Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM), an organization comprised mostly of former Afghan mujahidin that advocated the overthrow of the government of then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad and the creation of an Islamic state comprising Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei and the southern Philippines. While leading KMM in Malaysia, Marwan maintained close contact with militant groups in Chechnya and Bosnia and allegedly recruited Malaysians to fight in those two countries (*The Star* [Petaling Jaya], March 29, 2007).

In January 2002, Marwan fled from Malaysia to Indonesia after Malaysian police raided and detained JI members who operated the “JI Ivy League” Lukmanul Hakiem religious school in Ulu Tiram, Johor State in 2001. [1] In Indonesia,

Marwan became involved in the October 12, 2002 bombings in Kuta, Bali’s jam-packed tourist district, with the help of his older brother, Rahmat, who provided him with radios and cash that were used to carry out the attack. On September 5, 2003 Malaysia offered a \$16,500 reward for Marwan’s capture, but by August 2003 Marwan was already in southern Mindanao under the protection of Abu Sayyaf and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

Marwan began to live more permanently in southern Mindanao after 2003. There he trained Abu Sayyaf members in explosives and sniping and helped to set up terrorist camps. His record includes attacks on U.S. interests and military bases, as well as involvement in a number of bombings in Central Mindanao in 2006-2007, conducted with a member of the MILF, Abdulbasit Usman (see *Terrorism Monitor*, April 5, 2007). His cell was broken up on March 3, 2010, when the AFP arrested three of his men in a raid in Manila’s Maharlika district, which is home to a large Muslim community (Reuters, March 3, 2010). Marwan’s disciples and trainees have also been responsible for numerous bombings that have plagued the Philippines since his arrival.

Death on the Farm

Marwan was killed on a farm that served as one of his training and recruiting camps in Mamasapano, Maguindanao in Mindanao, which was run by two militias that signed a peace agreement with the government in March 2014—the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) (*GMA News*, February 25). BIFF, however, has, according to government sources, abandoned the peace agreement because it did not provide Muslims with an adequate guarantee that they can implement Shari’a in Mindanao. This is likely why an internationally-wanted terrorist like Marwan, who had the same ideology as BIFF, received shelter on the farm in contravention to the agreement (*Interaksyon*, April 14).

Recruiting for Islamic State

Marwan reportedly traveled to Maguindanao from Sulu after the airstrike nearly killed him in February 2012. Abu Sayyaf commander Radulla expelled Marwan from Sulu because he was too much of a “magnet” for airstrikes and raids by Philippines and international forces (*Philippine Star*, February 1). According to the interrogation of a former Abu Sayyaf leader, Khair Mundos, who was arrested in June 2014, Marwan’s main task in Maguindanao was recruiting young jihadists for the Islamic State (*Manila Times*, April 24).

Marwan likely benefitted from being among BIFF militants because they and allied militant groups, such as Khalifa Islamiyah Mindanao (KIM), and the Islamic State, share the goal of a global Caliphate (rather than MILF militants, who would settle for autonomy in Mindanao), and therefore Marwan could recruit more easily for the Islamic State. Up to 200 militants from Mindanao may have joined with Islamic State from these networks, although that estimate may conflate Mindanaoans with other Southeast Asians, including Australians. Among the Mindanaon militants in Syria is reportedly an ethnic Mindanaoan Tausug who reportedly took part in the beheading of U.S. aid worker Peter Kassig in Syria ([Manila Bulletin](#), July 9, 2014; [Manila Bulletin](#), May 22, 2014).

Still Operational

Despite being confined to BIFF areas in just a recruitment role, Marwan still had lethal, operational ambitions. For example, when Pope Francis visited Manila in January 2015, Marwan planned to bomb the Pope's convoy, but the plot failed, perhaps due to Marwan's remoteness from Manila ([Interaksyon](#), February 9). Reports that an Islamic State-trained Philippine engineer was involved in a separate plot on the Pope in Manila suggests that Marwan may have known of the Islamic State's interest in an attack on the Pope. Therefore he may designed his own plot to attack the Pope to win further credibility with the Islamic State, for whom he was recruiting young militants ([Get Real Philippines](#), March 15).

Conclusion

The case of Marwan shows how militants evolve in their careers and can shift loyalties depending on their location and the opportunities that are presented to them. It also exemplifies how intelligent militants, like Marwan, an engineer, can play hybrid roles both in recruiting and carrying out attacks, which makes them more valuable for the militant groups. At the same, it also shows that the combined efforts of the United States, international and Philippine security forces over the course of nearly a decade hunting Marwan ultimately bore fruit, with the report of his death in February 2015. Nonetheless, Marwan's recent efforts to recruit BIFF militants into the Islamic State likely means Marwan's disciples will pose a threat to the interests of the Philippines and other countries in the future.

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Note

1. *Jemaah Islamiyah in South East Asia: Damaged but Still Dangerous*, International Crisis Group, August 26, 2003, p.26, www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-east-asia/indonesia/063-jemaah-islamiyah-in-south-east-asia-damaged-but-still-dangerous.aspx.