



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

Personalities Behind the Insurgency

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THE IRGC'S IRAQI POINT MEN IN SYRIA: SHAYKH AUWS AL-KHAFAJI AND SHAYKH AMMAR AL-LAMI

Nicholas A. Heras

The Liwa Abu Fadhil al-Abbas network, including its affiliated organization Quwat Abu Fadhil al-Abbas, is an important component of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-coordinated militias supplementing the Syrian government's forces in many loyalist areas, including in and around the country's capital of Damascus. [1] Shaykh Auws al-Khafaji, the Secretary General of the organization, and his primary adjutant Shaykh Ammar al-Lami (a.k.a. Abu Kamil), the commander of the organization's special forces, are responsible for coordinating Quwat Abu Fadhil al-Abbas' operations in Iraq and Syria (El-Watan News [Cairo], October 9; YouTube, July 16; YouTube, May 8; al-Nahar [Beirut], December 14, 2014; al-Sharq [Riyadh], May 5, 2013). Since 2012, Shaykh al-Khafaji and Shaykh al-Lami have helped coordinate Iraqi Shi'a fighters traveling from Iraq to the southern Damascus suburb of Sayyida Zaynab, especially through the Liwa Abu Fadhil al-Abbas network, to protect the important Shi'a shrine of the same name, including traveling in person to the Sayyida Zaynab neighborhood (YouTube, May 23; Mawazin News, May 10; al-Nahar [Beirut], December 14, 2014; YouTube, November 10, 2014; All4Syria [Damascus], June 20, 2014). Al-Khafaji recently reaffirmed his organization's leading role in providing military support for the al-Assad government and its close ties to the IRGC:

There is clear and conspicuous cooperation between us and the Syrian state. We do not cross the state's border illegally, as does the enemy, and the Syrian army is with us in every citizen, and we are in one front with the Syrian Arab Army [al-Assad government forces]. This is not new historically, and there continues to be strategic cooperation and constant logistical cooperation between us, and with the brothers of Hezbollah (El-Watan



Fatiha al-Mejjati (a.k.a. Umm Adam) is perhaps the most powerful women in the Islamic State organization.

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News [Cairo], October 9).

However, in Iraq, both al-Khafaji and al-Lami are careful to place Quwat Abu Fadhil al-Abbas' role in that country within a nationalist, pan-sectarian context, where the organization is portrayed as being most active under the umbrella militia network of the Popular Mobilization Committees that are coordinated by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior. They reject the assertion that Quwat Abu Fadhil al-Abbas is a Shi'a sectarian force that targets the Iraqi Sunni community and only serves the interests of the IRGC (YouTube, October 26; YouTube, July 16; YouTube, June 21; YouTube, May 8; YouTube, April 5; YouTube, March 4; YouTube, January 13). Shaykh al-Khafaji, in particular, has become a frequent commentator in Iraqi media on the anti-Islamic State military role of Quwat Abu Fadhil al-Abbas, and is a figure of increasing public stature inside Iraq as the organization improves its media outreach (YouTube). The public image that is cultivated by both Shaykh al-Khafaji and Shaykh al-Lami is that of fighting clerics, providing religious instruction and moral authority, while being portrayed as effective military strategists and warriors, leading Quwat Abu Fadhil al-Abbas fighters from the frontlines (YouTube, May 28; YouTube, May 23; BuzzFeed, April 1; YouTube, March 24; YouTube, November 14, 2014).

Shaykh Auws al-Khafaji

Shaykh al-Khafaji, 42, is a native of the large town of al-Shatrah in Iraq's south-central Dhi Qar governorate, located 41 kilometers northeast of the governorate's capital, al-Nasiriyah (YouTube, June 21). He asserts that he was a political activist from a young age, participating as a 17-year-old in the popular uprisings in al-Shatrah, which were similar to other uprisings against the Saddam Hussein government in Shi'a-majority areas throughout southern Iraq in 1991 (YouTube, April 5). Furthermore, al-Khafaji has extensive experience as a political activist, religious leader and militia organizer, beginning this experience with Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (Mahdi Army) organization in the mid-2000s (YouTube, May 8; YouTube, December 20, 2011). Later that decade, al-Khafaji was associated with the formation of the Promised Day Brigade in 2008, reportedly an IRGC-backed organization associated with al-Sadr that was referenced by U.S. military commanders as one of the most effective and dangerous Shi'a organizations fighting coalition forces in Iraq (al-Basrah.net [Basra], November 10, 2010; al-Jazeera, September 11, 2011; *Los Angeles Times*, July 14, 2010; American Forces Press Service, February 17, 2010).

Al-Khafaji studied at a university in Basra, where he began instruction in the *hawza* (Shi'a religious school). He eventually traveled to Najaf, during which time he became

a disciple and student of Sayyid Muhammad Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr, the father of Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr and an extremely popular and controversial Iraqi Shi'a cleric who was assassinated by the Saddam Hussein government in February 1999 (YouTube, June 21). After completing his religious studies, al-Khafaji entered the elder al-Sadr's service as a prayer leader in al-Nasiriyah, a position that eventually led to al-Khafaji's arrest and imprisonment by the Saddam Hussein government in February 1999, shortly after the assassination of Sayyid Muhammad Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr (Uruk News Agency [Baghdad], June 23; YouTube, June 21; Iraq News, February 22, 1999).

After Saddam Hussein was deposed and al-Khafaji was released from prison, he became an important adjutant to Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr, serving in a variety of public roles: for instance, he was the Sadrism movement's spokesman and prayer leader in al-Nasiriyah, and an interlocutor between the Jaysh al-Mahdi organization and the foreign press, officials from the U.S.-led coalition administration and coalition military forces (CNN, May 20, 2005; al-Jazeera, August 25, 2004; *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 26, 2004). [2] However, the relationship became strained and even confrontational when Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr decided that Jaysh al-Mahdi would cease violent resistance against the U.S.-led coalition, and al-Khafaji refused. As a result of pressure from coalition forces, he reportedly lived in exile in the Sayyida Zaynab area of Damascus from the middle of 2006 to May 2007 (Uruk News Agency [Baghdad], June 23; YouTube, June 21; YouTube, February 18, 2012; Jawabna [Najaf], February 9, 2012; Al-Basrah.net [Basra], November 10, 2010).

While in exile, al-Khafaji built a network among the existing Iraqi communities in that Damascus neighborhood, the majority of which are comprised of Shi'a refugees. This local Damascene network would eventually be built into a force that Shaykh al-Khafaji claims currently has more than 1,500 fighters, and has participated in battles on behalf of the al-Assad government in Damascus and in the mountainous Syrian-Lebanese border region of the Qalamoun (El-Watan News [Cairo], October 9; al-Nahar [Beirut], December 14, 2014; Tariq Karbala News, May 20, 2007). Al-Khafaji's leadership role in Quwat Abu Fadhil al-Abbas pairs well with his adjutant and mentee, Shaykh Ammar al-Lami, who is emerging as a major, albeit youthful leader in the Iraqi Shi'a political militia movement.

Shaykh Ammar al-Lami

Al-Lami, 27, is a native of the al-Karkh district of Baghdad, and he studied *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) at a *hawza* in the suburb of Kadhimayn. He was influenced by the ideology

of the Da'wa Party from a young age, and he also spent time in Najaf studying under important clerics in the Sadrist movement (YouTube, July 16). A teenager when the U.S.-led coalition deposed the Saddam Hussein government, he eventually joined a local Jaysh al-Mahdi affiliate in Kadhimayn, and the experience of being a young member of the resistance against the coalition forces in Iraq significantly shaped al-Lami's worldview in support of the Shi'a Islamic Resistance, helping him develop into a young, rising leader in the local, Shi'a militia network (YouTube, July 16; YouTube, November 10, 2014). By late 2012, al-Khafaji and al-Lami were reportedly working together to send Iraqi Shi'a fighters to protect the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, but it was the rise of the Islamic State in western Iraq after it captured the northwestern city of Mosul in June 2014—and the threat that the Salafist group posed to Shi'a areas of Iraq—that brought al-Khafaji and al-Lami formally together to build Quwat Abu Fadhil al-Abbas (El-Watan News [Cairo], October 9; YouTube, July 16; al-Nahar [Beirut], December 14, 2014).

Al-Lami reportedly maintains ties to Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH—League of the Righteous Ones), and currently serves in a coordinating role between Quwat Abu Fadhil al-Abbas and other Iraqi Shi'a organizations that are part of the PMCs, as well as groups that have long-standing ties to IRGC-backed Iraqi Shi'a militias, such as AAH (YouTube, July 16; YouTube, November 10, 2014). Helping with this position is the fact that he was previously an official with al-Muqwama al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq-Liwa al-Wa'ad al-Sadiq (The Islamic Resistance Movement in Iraq—Legion of the Truthful Pledge), an umbrella organization of Iraqi Shi'a militias (YouTube, November 10, 2014; Baghdad International News Agency, March 8, 2012). Although a relatively young commander, al-Lami is well positioned to be an important figure in the IRGC-backed Iraqi Shi'a militia network, and he seems to be more clearly tied than al-Khafaji to the ideology of the *wilayat al-faqih* (state of the jurisprudence) that governs the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Conclusion

Quwat Abu Fadhil al-Abbas is an important organization within the IRGC's predominately Iraqi Shi'a militia network, which is a primary source of reserve manpower for the al-Assad government to conduct offensive operations in Syria and to hold terrain in strategic loyalist areas, particularly in Damascus. Shaykh al-Khafaji and Shaykh al-Lami have been important organizers within this network, including in establishing its initial operations center in the Sayyida Zaynab district of Damascus. Quwat Abu Fadhil al-Abbas is also rising in prominence in Iraq, and it could be positioned to be a major military and social actor. Increasingly, Quwat

Abu Fadhil al-Abbas and its IRGC network affiliates are important to the anti-Islamic State campaign for the Iraqi government in Baghdad. Guided by al-Khafaji and al-Lami's leadership, Quwat Abu Fadhil al-Abbas is seeking to portray itself the foundation of a popular resistance force against the Islamic State and foreign actors—such as the United States, Israel and Sunni Gulf Arab countries—that it views as being hostile toward Iraq and the group's IRGC patron.

Notes

1. For a comprehensive analysis of the strategic role that IRGC-backed Iraqi Shi'a militias play in supporting the al-Assad government and this network's potential broader role in the Middle East region, see: Philip Smyth, *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus138-v3.pdf>. Smyth also analyzes the evolution of the Liwa Abu Fadhil al-Abbas organization, including Quwat Abu Fadhil al-Abbas, in *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects*.
2. In this capacity, Shaykh al-Khafaji notably was the intermediary who handled the release from captivity of the American journalist Micah Green and his Iraqi translator in August 2004, the pair having been kidnapped by Shi'a militias with ties to Jaysh al-Mahdi and held in al-Nasiriyyah before their release in late August 2004. For more information on Shaykh al-Khafaji's role in the release of Micah Green and his Iraqi colleague, see: Micah Green and Marie-Hélène Carlton, *American Hostage: A Memoir of a Journalist Kidnapped in Iraq and the Remarkable Battle to Win His Release*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), pgs. 15, 88, 215-216, 247.

Egypt's Most Wanted—Hisham Ali Ashmawy Mosaad Ibrahim

Muhammad Mansour

Hisham Ali Ashmawy Mosaad Ibrahim (a.k.a. Abu Omar al-Muhajir al-Masri) is a former Egyptian military officer turned al-Qaeda jihadist who has become the most wanted militant in Egypt. He defected from Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM), a Sinai Peninsula-based group, after the group declared an oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State, in November 2014, and became the organization's Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province). Unswayed by the Islamic State's powerful appeal, Ashmawy continues to follow in the footsteps of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda, who recently ridiculed the Islamic State's discourse; he described al-Baghdadi's caliphate in an audio message released last month as "illegitimate," adding that "we do not acknowledge the caliphate, and Muslims are not obliged to pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi" (YouTube, October 9). Like his icon, Ashmawy believes the Islamic State deviates from the right jihadist path. For this reason, he formed a new al-Qaeda-inspired group within Egypt called al-Murabitun.

Ashmawy was first mentioned by former Egyptian interior minister Mohamed Ibrahim as the mastermind of the foiled assassination against him in 2013 (al-Arabiya, October 3). After carrying out a series of attacks against police and military personnel over two years, in July 2015, Ashmawy announced that he was the amir of "al-Murabitun," a word with a Quranic connotation, meaning "Sentinels" (Sasa Post, July 26). The newly-founded group seems to be an extension of the al-Murabitun group in Mali, which has also refused to switch allegiance from al-Qaeda to the Islamic State. The Egyptian al-Murabitun appears to be trying to fill the shoes of other al-Qaeda-inspired groups that were weakened by the heavy-handed security crackdowns, such as Afnan Misr (Soldiers of Egypt).

For its part, al-Qaeda views al-Murabitun as a face-saving attempt to compete in Egypt with the Islamic State by supporting and funding Ashmawy's group. According to Egyptian security investigations, in fall 2014, a delegation from al-Qaeda travelled to Sinai to convince ABM to stay loyal (al-Watan, July 23). However, after the group declared allegiance to al-Baghdadi, al-Qaeda cut off its funding and support and encouraged Ashmawy and others to split and form a new group.

Ashmawy, 35, is a former Egyptian special forces officer known as "Thunderbolt," who was dismissed for his radical anti-military views in either 2009 or 2011 after serving roughly 14 years in the Egyptian military. He subsequently received training in manufacturing explosive charges in Syria and Libya from Abdul Baset Azoz, one of Ayman al-Zawahiri's aides. In 2013, after Egyptian President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, Ashmawy joined ABM, which was then inspired by al-Qaeda (al-Watan, July 2). While there, Ashmawy was training the group's militants, drawing on his in-depth knowledge of military tactics; concurrently, he led several operations against the Egyptian military, including the Farafra attack on July 19, 2014, which claimed the lives of 22 soldiers, and the Sinai attacks that killed 29 soldiers near al-Arish in February 2015.

His paramount role in orchestrating and carrying out terrorist operations against military and police officers made him one of the most wanted men in the country by the Egyptian government. Members of the security apparatus accused him of being the mastermind of the foiled assassination against then-Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim in September 2013 and the assassination that killed Egypt's General Prosecutor in 2015, although no group has claimed responsibility for that specific attack (al-Watan, July 2).

Ashmawy's new group reflects the deep state of polarization—not only in Egypt but in other countries—between Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Ayman al-Zawahiri. For instance, members of the Sinai-based ABM were divided about whether or not to switch allegiance from al-Zawahiri to al-Baghdadi in late 2014. Ultimately, the majority—led by Kamal Alaam, Ahmad Zaid al-Kilany and Abo Osama al-Masry—decided to be a part of the Islamic State (Sasa Post, July 26). The decision was strategic as it enhanced the group's survival against subsequent military crackdowns; it also meant a flow of regional weaponry as well as financial and recruitment support from the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and in bordering Libya, leading to several subsequent attacks on the Egyptian military). Yet, for Ashmawy, this shift in allegiance and attack styles was not strategically correct, given the seeming impossibility of gaining territory in Sinai, where the Egyptian military still has the upper hand.

For that reason, the minority—led by Ashmawy—remained in the same track of al-Zawahiri, preferring the usual al-Qaeda tactics of hit-and-run attacks, booby-trapped cars and assassination attempts of high-profile figures in the al-Sisi government; such tactics seem to be more realistic and less costly despite the fact that al-Qaeda-affiliated groups currently have less leverage and support, which also makes

them easier targets for security crackdowns. For instance, al-Qaeda-inspired Afnan Misr, which emerged in 2014 by dealing harsh blows to security forces in Cairo, became ineffective after security forces killed the group's leader Magd Eddin al-Masry Humam Muhammed in April 2015 (al-Youm al-Saba, July 27). Also, unlike in the Sinai, with its rough terrain and lighter police presence, the Egyptian police are much stronger in Cairo and the Delta, areas where al-Murabitun will likely operate. Proving Ashmawy correct, in January 2015, the Sinai Province launched a series of intensive attacks on military and police bases, but the group was unable to contend with a long direct exchange of fire with the military. The militants suffered a high number of casualties, and operations have been badly affected since then (Al-Monitor, July 6).

Ashmawy introduced al-Murabitun in an audio message posted on July 20 on an al-Qaeda-affiliated forum. The six-minute message was introduced by a recorded voice of al-Zawahiri calling for jihad followed by Ashmawy condemning President al-Sisi, saying that the country is “overpowered by the new pharaoh.” He then accused Sisi “and his soldiers” of fighting “our religion” and killing “our men and women” (YouTube, July 22; al-Ahram, July 24). Ashmawy's message was reminiscent of previous al-Qaeda messages in the Arabian Peninsula in 2009, and it was also similar to the message announcing the foundation of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. All of these messages included snippets of old speeches from Osama bin Laden and al-Zawahiri on topics ranging from liberating Jerusalem from the “Zionists” and Israel to launching jihad against Western targets and supporters of the West. According to July's message, Ashmawy's al-Murabitun lists the Palestinian cause as its supreme goal. This is a subtle attack on the Islamic State's Sinai Province, since the original name of the group (Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis) means Supporters of Jerusalem.

Ashmawy then released a 42-minute audio speech on October 1, in which he called on Muslims in Egypt to carry out lone wolf attacks on Egyptian police, soldiers and media personnel who “fight the religion of Allah day and night through their media channels.” [1] He also told listeners to record evidence of the murder and send it to al-Murabitun through the forums or Telegrams, a new messaging platform. In the audio message, released on the al-Fida and the Areen al-Mujahideen jihadist forums, Ashmawy also called on Muslims to take revenge for the killing of Palestinian teenager Hadeel al-Hashlamon by Israeli soldiers.

Ashmawy's decision to take al-Zawahiri's side and resume al-Qaeda-style operations adds to the already heavy burdens that the security apparatus in Egypt endures in its crackdown

on the Sinai Province's strongholds in the peninsula. The success of the military in dismantling the Sinai insurgency could mean more defections from the Islamic State group to Ashmawy's group, especially if it operates well in Cairo and the Delta. Already, Ashmawy is more popular and has achieved more than any other jihadist in Egypt, making him the new icon for many would-be militants across the country.

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

Note

1. A link to the audio message can be seen at Site http://sitemultimedia.org/video/SITE_Murabiteen_Ashmawi_Not_Become_Weak.mp4.

Asia Ahmed Mohamed: Spain's Islamic State Recruiter in Ceuta

Alex Calvo

Born into a Muslim family in Spain's Ceuta, Asia Ahmed Mohamed is just one of several Spanish women who have traveled to Iraq or Syria to join the Islamic State or another jihadist militia. She became connected to the militant group when she was searching for information about her brother, who had already traveled to the Middle East to fight and was killed. While looking for information about his death, she met another jihadist, known as Kokito Castillejos, and married him before traveling to join the Islamic State in late 2014. A teacher by training, her case confirms Ceuta as a hotbed of Islamism.

Ceuta is a Spanish territory that is also claimed by Morocco with a significant Muslim population. [1] Terrorism experts Fernando Reinares and Carola García-Calvo noted in October 2014 that out of 35 individuals with some connection to Iraq and Syria arrested throughout Spain since 2013, ten percent were from Ceuta. Together with Melilla, these two North African cities only account for 4.5 percent of Muslims living in Spain (Real Instituto El Cano, October 20, 2014). Additionally, in November 2014, Spanish police identified six women who have traveled to Syria or Iraq; two (including Mohamed) were from Ceuta, while two others were married to Moroccan jihadists and often visited the city (*El Mundo*, November 10, 2014).

Asia Ahmed Mohamed (also spelled "Assia," a.k.a. "Asia Um Hilal Alisbania") grew up in Ceuta, where she completed at least high school (La Nueva Espana, April 10). She also holds Moroccan nationality (Diario Vasco, June 5, 2014). She has been described as "very honest," with a "very strong, very firm" faith. [2]

Her brother Younes Ahmed Mohamed (a.k.a. "el Esponja"—the Sponge) was killed while fighting in Syria, and she was trying to find out the circumstances of his death in the spring of 2014 when she met Kokito Castillejos, a jihadist from Fnideq, a Moroccan town near Ceuta. They fell in love and were married by proxy online. According to some reports, Asia was spurred on by her family (El Faro Digital, April 9). Castillejos, who has appeared in pictures with beheaded victims, explained that the marriage had taken place "through the Islamic court" of the Islamic State, even though they had married while she was still in Ceuta.

In order to live with her husband, Mohamed traveled to al-Tarib, between Iraq and Syria, in June 2014. Castillejos gave her an explosives belt as a dowry, saying it "is to carry out a martyrdom operation or just show off its look... Anyway, we are ready for such an operation since we find ourselves in lands of war and treason. I hope God helps us to keep our steps firm." [3]

They had a child, born in late March 2015. Mohamed reportedly said in Facebook post "let the kid born under the caliphate get to become an *ulema* [wise man] and obtain paradise" (El Faro Digital, April 9). Given Mohamed's Spanish citizenship, her baby, a boy, is also a Spanish national. The families of both parents welcomed the birth (Minuto Digital, April 10). According to a source close to her relatives, Mohamed regularly talks to her family via Skype, telling them that she is fine and not to worry: "She lives in a house for women, studying Arabic and reading the Quran. She is very content and happy" (*El País*, July 10).

Journalist Chema Gil Garre believes that Asia Mohamed and Kokito Castillejos may have actually met in Fnideq, since "it has been possible to verify that this girl had been in the store where Mohamed Hamaduch [Kokito Castillejos] used to work." [4] According to his sources, she may have traveled to Syria through Morocco, and "very likely" did so "under a false identity but with a manipulated Spanish passport." [5]

Asia's previous job as a teacher is of particular concern to Spanish authorities, given the possibility that she may contact former students with the goal of recruiting them. Last December, some principals of Ceuta high schools said they had not noticed any substantive changes, while others admitted that a number of pupils had been approached. A social worker at one of these schools said she had discovered that seven minors (five boys and two girls aged between 15 and 17 years old) had been approached (either in person or through social media) from September to December 2014, but had denounced attempts at recruitment. One teacher mentioned an "exceptional" recruiter: Asia, an "angel-faced, indefatigable proselytizer" (*El Mundo*, December 9, 2014). The report also cited unnamed experts who believe that up to eight additional women in Ceuta may be pondering traveling to a conflict zone.

The case of Asia Ahmed Mohamed reflects a number of significant trends. First of all, the Islamic State's use of women to recruit other women, in particular foreign women, and their potential penetration of schools and other institutions. Social media may be an important tool, but recruitment by those in a position of trust can be very effective. Second, while Ceuta has not yet experienced any terrorist attacks,

some areas within the city increasingly reflect jihadist mores; Islamists have kept a low profile by concentrating on social control and avoiding taking sides in the Spanish-Moroccan dispute over sovereignty, but their strength is growing. Third, the case should serve as a cautionary tale about simplistic narratives connecting poverty, education and jihadism. Ceuta may be relatively poor compared to mainland Spain and dependent on subsidies and smuggling, but Asia Ahmed Mohamed's case shows how someone can be well educated, have a professional career and a future in mainstream society and still choose to turn to jihad.

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Note

1. "Estudio demográfico de la población musulmana," Union de Comunidades Islamicas de Espana, December 21, 2014, <http://ucide.org/sites/default/files/revistas/estademograf14.pdf>.
2. "Nuestros Jihadistas," Instituto de Seguridad Global, April 2015, <http://www.institutodeseguridadglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/articulo-isg-004.pdf>.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. The report can be read at <http://www.institutodeseguridadglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/articulo-isg-001.pdf>.

A Portrait of the Islamic State's British Propagandist Ifthekar Jaman

James Brandon

Since the start of the Syrian civil war, British police estimate that at least 700 British Muslims are believed to have traveled to that country to fight for various jihadist groups (BBC, September 18). Few have so far achieved significant leadership positions or any enduring stature, largely due to the high rate of attrition among fighters, their poor Arabic and their general lack of battlefield ability. Others who may have potentially emerged as a significant terrorist threat have been deliberately eliminated. These include Junaid Hussain and Reyaad Khan, two British Muslims who were killed in a Royal Air Force drone strike in Syria in September after evidence emerged that they "were involved in actively recruiting ISIL [Islamic State] sympathizers and seeking to orchestrate specific and barbaric attacks against the West (Gov.uk, September 7). However, aside from these, one individual particularly stands out—Iftthekar Jaman, who was killed by Syrian government forces in the east of the country in December 2013. Jaman, who was just 23 years old when he was killed, was noteworthy for his role in the propaganda operations of the Islamic State's previous incarnation—the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS. There is growing evidence that the example he provided to Islamist militants, both through his life and the violent manner of his death, continues to inspire other British jihadists.

Born in the UK to first-generation Bangladeshi immigrants, Iftthekar Jaman was brought up in the southern English town of Portsmouth, where his family ran an Indian restaurant. Unlike many other Western jihadists, he reportedly had a stable upbringing and did not adopt hardline Islamism as a radical response to an earlier messy involvement in drinking, drug use or crime. On the contrary, in his early teens, his parents sent him to an Islamic boarding school in London for a year, which seems to have imbued him with both an enduring sense of piety and a strong Islamic identity (*Newsweek*, January 23). Illustrating this piety, upon his return to Portsmouth from London in his late teens, he was active in the "Portsmouth Dawa Team," a small group of Salafists seeking to convert others to Islam, often through setting up stalls and engaging with passersby on the city's high street (*Telegraph*, August 23, 2014; *New Statesman*, November 6, 2014). He also had a job in a call center, where he interacted with non-Muslim colleagues without incident; after his death, one non-Muslim colleague who attended a

memorial service for him described him as “very passionate about his faith... very devout and always very polite” (*Portsmouth News*, December 19, 2013).

At the same time, however, for reasons presently unknown, he also adopted a more hardline ideological stance, likely as a result of radicalization, at least partially online. For instance, British media had reported that before traveling to Syria, he had tweeted praise for Anwar al-Awlaki, the Yemeni-American English-language al-Qaeda preacher who was killed in a drone strike in 2011 (BBC, November 21, 2013). In early 2013, having told his parents that he was going to the Middle East to study, Jaman traveled to Turkey before crossing into Syria thanks to a chance encounter in Turkey with a Syrian extremist-sympathizer from Aleppo. He initially hoped to join Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda’s official affiliate in the country, but he was rejected due to his lack of jihadist credentials (*New Statesman*, November 6, 2014). As a result, he subsequently joined ISIS, which was apparently willing to accept foreign volunteers who had not been explicitly vouched for by current jihadists. Jaman’s exact motives for seeking to join first Jabhat al-Nusra, and then ISIS, remain slightly obscure. Although he later told British media that he had joined ISIS to do his “duty” as civilians were “being slaughtered,” it is likely that the group’s commitment to both enforcing Shari’a and to, in the long-run, pursuing a global jihadist agenda was at least part of the attraction, as demonstrated by his previous praise for al-Awlaki (BBC, November 21, 2013)

Once in Syria, ISIS quickly recognized Jaman’s value as an online propagandist, spreading the group’s message through social media and engaging online with would-be volunteers. This was likely partly because at the time, months before its offensive in northern Iraq in the summer of 2014, the group was still relatively little-known and, as a result, lacked an extensive cadre of internet-savvy, English-speaking volunteers. Although Jaman was relatively coy about his exact role in ISIS, the group appears to have accommodated him some distance from the frontlines, apparently in a facility dedicated to online media work. For instance, in his online comments, Jaman alluded to working with ISIS’s media team and even offering them advice, saying: “I’m also suggesting to the media team to take women to join the media war” (Ask.fm, November 14, 2013). Elsewhere, he said that “the *doula* [ISIS] place I’m at now has installed internet in the building with wifi for us,” which is again suggestive of the relatively stable rear-area location where the group prioritized online work (Ask.fm, November 11, 2013).

Once established online, Jaman rapidly gained a significant following of would-be jihadists in the West, putting out his

message through a variety of platforms, including Twitter (where he had 3,000 followers) and Instagram, as well as videos. Although Jaman shared photos of himself posing with weapons, many of his conversations focused on more mundane aspects of life with ISIS, deliberately downplaying the risks. In one widely quoted online remark, he said: “There are those who think that the Jihad in Syria is 24/7 fighting but it’s much more relaxed than that. They’re calling it a five star jihad” (Channel4, February 5, 2014). Separately, in a question-and-answer session on the online forum Ask.fm, he reassured one would-be jihadist that there was no need to speak Arabic before coming to Syria, saying he “knew only a tiny bit of Arabic... There are many like you & you will fit in [Inshallah] with the help of Allah,” (*The National*, [UAE], December 9, 2013; Ask.fm, November 10, 2013). In other social media posts, he shared diverse photos showing fighters relaxing, landscapes and even kittens, although he was clear about his motives: “The reason why I share so much is to show you how it is, the kittens, the landscape, etc, hoping to make you see the beauty of it & come” (*New Statesman*, November 6, 2014). At the same time, Jaman remained firmly committed to imposing ISIS’s hardline Islamic vision, apparently seeing no contradiction between his desire to fight “oppression” while simultaneously helping the group to forcibly impose its interpretation of Shari’a on Syria’s people, which he described as “trying to establish the law of God, the law of Allah” (BBC, December 17, 2013). Much of his media work therefore had a dual purpose: to make jihad seem both attainable and relatively risk-free to non-Arabic speaking Muslims in the West, but at the same time a glorious, noble struggle against evil.

Through his media work, Jaman is known to have convinced at least one group of five other British men to travel to Syria, including three close friends and relatives from Portsmouth, although his real influence is likely to have been considerably greater (Channel4, February 5, 2014). The group of five, which included his cousin Asad Uzzaman, traveled to Turkey in October 2013, flying inconspicuously on a tourist flight to the Mediterranean resort of Antalya, before crossing into Syria (*Guardian*, July 27). As well as providing them with ideological inspiration, Jaman was later found to have also offered them large amounts of practical advice, including what clothes to bring and how much money was needed to purchase weapons, and probably facilitated their actual crossing into Syria (CPS, 2014). The group of five, who styled themselves the “Bangladeshi Bad Boys Brigade,” achieved only brief fame. Although they managed to cultivate their own social media profiles, inspiring further foreign fighters, four of them were killed in Syria within a year. The fifth returned to the UK and was arrested and imprisoned—the first UK citizen jailed on terrorism charges for involvement

in jihadist activity in Syria (*Portsmouth News*, December 5, 2014).

In December 2013, in what was apparently his first actual involvement in combat, Jaman was killed by a Syrian government tank-shell in the village of Ghazwa al-Khair, near the Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor, reportedly while attacking an arms depot (*Financial Times*, March 28, 2014). In retrospect, it is clear that ISIS made a serious mistake in allowing this practically untrained individual take part in this operation; his value to the group was far greater online than on the battlefield. Death has not ended Jaman's influence, however. Shortly after his death, Osmaan Majid, a community worker in Scotland, recorded and distributed online an audio eulogy for him, describing Jaman as a "martyr" and calling him "handsome." The eulogy also said that he died "in a way pleasing to Allah," adding that "this guy looks like what the prophet would have looked like" (*Daily Record*, January 25). Jaman's brother, Mustakim, also told the British media: "He died protecting the people. He fought for his God and the people itself... His martyrdom is such a noble way to go out" (Channel4, February 4, 2014). In October 2015, Mustakim and another brother were convicted of providing assistance for fighters traveling to Syria, including by using their bank accounts to transfer money for the fighters, a move likely partly inspired by their brother's example (*Portsmouth News*, October 21). Material found on laptops used by the family included recorded sermons by the deceased Yemeni-American al-Qaeda propagandist Anwar al-Awlaki, underlining that their commitment to jihad in Syria was at least partly influenced by ideas of global, anti-Western jihadism (*Portsmouth News*, May 5).

These continuing developments, including online eulogies and fresh involvement in plots by his family, underline how the train of events set in motion by Jaman, both through his actions and through the example of his "martyrdom" in Syria, continue to reverberate. They further show the powerful influence that a single individual foreign jihadist can have through their social media work—especially if, as in the case of Jaman, the Islamic State successfully recognizes their potential and provides them the space, time and internet facilities to dedicate themselves to this task. At the same time, for now at least, the heavy attrition of foreign fighters in Syria, both through drone strikes and due to their short life expectancy on the actual battlefield, is preventing other such individuals from gaining similar prominence. Therefore, although Jaman, unlike other English-speaking radical propagandists such as al-Awlaki, leaves no significant body of work or thought behind, his example nonetheless shows the dangers that can arise when a native English speaker, who knows how to communicate with their target

audience of young disillusioned Muslims in the West, joins forces with an active militant group, such as the Islamic State, in pursuit of a common cause.

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Umm Adam: The Architect Behind the Islamic State's Matchmaking Network

Halla Diyab

Fatiha Mohamed Taher Housni al-Mejjati (a.k.a. Umm Adam), is a member of the Islamic State's media committee and therefore one of the most powerful women in the organization (The Africa Channel, January 15). Wearing black from head to toe with a strong, bulky physique and deep, sonorous voice, she is single-handedly shaping a new form of terrorist female militancy by skillfully manipulating both gender restrictions and roles to carve out a new role of female power within the ranks of jihadist male militants. In her public discourse, Fatiha is a master of the art of manipulative rhetoric, alternating between a language of victimization and of tyranny. With language awash with references to her as a victim who has been subjected to all kinds of injustice by the authorities, Fatiha knows how to win sympathy and support from her male listeners. It is this uniquely manipulative rhetoric and oratory that makes her an important female militant in the Islamic State organizational structure.

Background

Aged about 55, Fatiha was the first wife of Karim Thami al-Mejjati, a Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group militant with allegiance to Osama bin Laden. She grew up in a popular area of Casablanca, in a family who practiced moderate Islam. In an extensive interview for the French television production "La Veuve Noire," Fatiha spoke of how she would wear short skirts and high heels as a young woman (YouTube, October 10, 2009).

Her path to radicalization started after the Gulf War erupted in 1990, when she was a law student in Paris (Morocco World News, July 10, 2014). Fatiha was greatly affected by what she considered to be an unjust war; she began to question everything and went through an identity crisis. Feeling disillusioned and let down by the West, she became radicalized at the age of 30. She returned to Morocco and got a job as an assistant manager at a management school (MEMRI, September 14, 2005). A few months later, she asked if she could come to work wearing a hijab, and when the school refused her permission, she quit. In response, some of the school's students began a petition to support her; one of these was the 24-year-old French-Moroccan Karim al-Mejjati, a secular educated graduate of a French high school

who married Fatiha in September 1991 (YouTube, October 10, 2009).

After accompanying Fatiha to a jihadist conference in Paris, Fatiha persuaded Karim to follow the path of jihad, and in 1992, just a year after they were married, Karim left to fight in Bosnia as a soldier of al-Qaeda. Fatiha justified her husband's acts as a response to the suffering of Muslims in Bosnia, which was the catalyst for him leaving everything and beginning his international missions and ascension into the ranks of the jihadist group (MEMRI, September 9, 2005).

Continuous Jihad

In 2001, Fatiha, Karim and their two children relocated to Afghanistan, where Karim was to become an explosives expert. For Fatiha, one of her sweetest memories was being bought her first Afghan chador—a cloth wrap worn around the head and upper body by Muslim women—which she described as "C'était le plus beau jour de ma vie" (the most beautiful day of my life) (Maghress, May 30, 2005). After Afghanistan, Karim took Fatiha and the children to Pakistan, with the goal of meeting Osama bin Laden, before settling in Saudi Arabia as a midlevel field operative for al-Qaeda. On March 23, 2003, Fatiha and her son Ilyas were visiting an eye clinic there when they were arrested, incarcerated and interrogated about her husband's terrorist activities solely in relation to the United States (*The National*, March 23, 2010). She said they subjected to torture, including sleep deprivation. They were transferred to Morocco for interrogation on June 20, 2003, and were held there until March 2004. However, the Moroccan government denies that Ilyas and his mother were ever detained (Maghress, June 3, 2005; Justice Morocco, May 31, 2012).

Her husband, Karim, was killed together with their 11-year-old son, Adam, by Saudi authorities in a series of raids in April 2005, for his alleged involvement in the Riyadh compound bombings and the 2003 Casablanca bombings, as well as masterminding the 2004 Madrid train bombings and the 2005 London bombings (Morocco World News, July 10, 2014).

Sometime after Karim's death, Fatiha Islamically married a man she never met—the Moroccan detainee Omar al-Omrani Hadi. Hadi is a Salafist-Jihadist activist who was sentenced by the Moroccan government to 14 years in Tiffelt prison on terrorism charges. The Moroccan government neither acknowledged her marriage to Hadi, nor granted her permission to visit him in prison, on the grounds that they did not have a civil marriage contract (Najdland). This resulted in her leading a series of protests in front of the

prison demanding his release (Maghress, July 11, 2014).

Human Rights Activism in Morocco

In October 2010, Fatiha founded the Committee of Truth in Morocco to defend the freedom of opinion and expression of faith (Maghress, January 1, 2013). Through her activism, Fatiha advocated for the rights of detainees, denouncing the sudden disappearances, torture and ongoing human rights violations in Morocco's *Temara* secret detention center. However, the Moroccan government repeatedly denied the existence of the facility (Arab Times Blogs, April 2011). She claims to have worked on several cases of former detainees who were tortured in *Temara*, most of whom are said to not want to talk about it after their release due to the taboo and shame associated with their imprisonment (YouTube, May 27, 2011).

Fatiha also claims that the facility is a secret American proxy run by the Moroccan government, and that she and her son, Ilyas, who was 10 at the time, were held in compulsory detention in *Temara* for nine months (YouTube, May 27, 2011). She claims that she and her son were subjected to emotional and psychological torture, which left her son traumatized and resulted in a permanent psychological condition and a hormonal disorder that caused extreme obesity. In 2010, she brought a case against the Moroccan government for the unlawful detention of her son in 2003, claiming that detention had left him mentally damaged (Foreign Policy, April 9, 2010).

For a woman who despises democracy and Western values, advocating for human rights and freedom of expression is a somewhat stark contrast. However, her allegiance to al-Qaeda and its anti-Western stance shaped her views that the secret detention of some Islamists is done to serve the CIA and to help import American-style democracy to the Muslim world (YouTube, October 10, 2009). Also, through human rights advocacy, Fatiha has again found a way to manipulate others and draw support to her cause, especially those desperate for political change in Morocco. Her human rights activism was at its peak in 2011-2012, which coincided with the Arab Spring that was sweeping through the Middle East and North Africa.

With the Arab Spring, Fatiha seized the opportunity to be heard on a wider public platform. An example of this is her filmed speech in support of the 20th February Movement, which led the protests in the streets of Morocco from February 20, 2011 through the spring of 2012. [1] She spoke on behalf of those in Moroccan prisons, whom she

referred to as “detainees” rather than “Islamist detainees,” intentionally aiming to engage with the freedom protesters who related to her cause on the basis of human rights rather than Islamist support. Throughout the speech, she altered her language to relate to the Freedom Movement, stating that “we want a free Morocco, in which we can live with dignity and freedom.” She then called on the protestors to support her cause, as they share the same beliefs and ethos, adding that “the regime builds barriers between us [i.e. the Islamists and the freedom protestors] by calling me a terrorist, but I am part of you and you are part of us, and we will support you until we liberate Morocco” (YouTube, April 22, 2011).

The Road to Syria

Fatiha announced her allegiance to Islamic State leader and self-declared caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi after her arrival in Raqqa, Syria on July 5, 2014; in an image posted to her Twitter account, Fatiha posed in front of the court in Jarabulus, a small Islamic State-controlled town near Syria's border with Turkey. Her arrival abroad put an end to the Moroccan government's concerns about her insidious influence in Morocco; the government had placed her under constant surveillance by secret police officers in Casablanca because she encouraged youth to perform jihad in Syria and Iraq, wage jihad against the United States, and pledge allegiance to the Islamic State, which Fatiha views as the fulfilment of the “promise of Allah” to Muslims (Maghress, July 11, 2014). She went to Syria to marry al Baghdadi's aid, and her son Ilyas acted as a middleman between his mother and the jihadist suitor (Jeune Afrique, November 24, 2014). It is reported that her suitor's job within the Islamic State is to replace Haji Bakr within al-Baghdadi's entourage.

The Islamic State's media arm subsequently led an online-media campaign on Twitter and Facebook called the “*Nafir* (call to arms) of our mother, Umm Adam, to the Islamic State,” celebrating Fatiha's arrival to the Islamic State. Fatiha is now the trainer of Islamic State women, the “mother of believers” (al-Arabiya, July 10, 2014; Le Parisien, June 15, 2014).

Manipulative Tactics

Fatiha's manipulation tactics are part of her strategy to access a wider audience for her jihadist cause, and to be accepted and heard especially by men. Her black full-body covering facilitates this access as if, by choosing to be totally covered from top to toe—even wearing black gloves and thick spectacles—Fatiha has divorced herself from her femininity, and so cannot be judged on it. She does not want to be seen as a woman, as this could discredit her ideological influence,

especially among Islamist men. She wants to be seen as an intelligent voice and active Islamist militant equal or even superior to her male peers. However, Fatiha's manipulation centers on rhetoric, which she shapes according to the situation, choosing when she wants to be seen as a woman who deserves sympathy, and when not.

This strategy is explicit during her May 2011 videoed speech, in which she testifies about the existence of Temara prison. In the video, Fatiha manipulates the emotion of her attendees and viewers by toning down her voice and beginning to cry when she talks about her detention in Temara with her son. Toward the end of her speech, she raises her voice in an authoritative tone when she denounces the Moroccan government (YouTube, May 27, 2011). In another video, titled "A state against a woman," Fatiha calls on the Moroccan government to execute her, allow her to relocate to another country or else grant her the freedom to remarry and work like other citizens. She cries during her video appeal and then raises her voice in an authoritative tone to explain that the problem the government has with her is that she wants Shari'a in Morocco, again employing her tactics of manipulation to gain support for her cause (YouTube, August 5, 2012). It is this manipulative strategy that has made her an appealing militant for the Islamic State, a woman who can draw a lot of support and sympathy to the group's cause.

Fatiha is in control of her emotions, never expressing yearning or sadness unless it is to manipulate others for the sake of the jihadist cause. There were occasions when Fatiha publicly expressed her emotions, but these were exercises in crowd manipulation. Fatiha has openly expressed her sexuality by opposing the court decision to not let her remarry because she lacked evidence of a civil divorce from the Moroccan detainee Omar al-Omrani Hadi, to whom she claims to have been married (YouTube, August 5, 2012). Still, she views emotional expression as vulnerability, which she protects herself from with her black covering and emotional detachment.

Women and Jihad

Fatiha is vocal about her sexual urges, with terms like "marriage" dominating her discourse and expressing her right to get married after her claimed divorce from Hadi. Previously married to two men, and still expressing her urges for a new marriage, Fatiha is very sexualized and passionate in her quest for male company and love. These stated sexual urges can be easily redirected to another male jihadist after widowhood and divorce. Contrary to the traditionalist Islamic narrative, which is discreet about sexual urges, Fatiha represents a breakthrough—a new frontier of female

jihadists who are very explicit in expressing their sexuality. Challenging the conventional norms of what is expected to be heard of a fully covered Muslim woman in a burqa, Fatiha's jihadist activism affords her the freedom to express her sexuality under a structured religious legitimacy.

By empowering someone like Fatiha and giving her a role as a leading female militant in the organization, the Islamic State is establishing a new role for female jihadist militants, different to that of jihadist women who are viewed as a means of reproduction to guarantee the survival of the organization. Unlike Fatiha, these romanticized jihadist women, such as the Malaysian militant Shams (a.k.a. Umm al-Baraa), do not reach the higher ranks of the organization or attain leadership roles. [2]

Another unusual aspect of Fatiha's role within the Islamic State is her effort to control the more vulnerable and weaker female militants through her involvement in matchmaking. For example, Ahlam al-Nasr's marriage to Abu Usama al-Ghareeb was facilitated by Fatiha; al-Nasr is one of the Islamic State's foremost poets and al-Ghareeb is a propagandist, making the pair the Islamic State's media power couple. [3] This allows her to cement her position as a key player in the jihadist organization's couple dynamics. Fatiha's operational authority over the al-Khansaa brigade, the Islamic State's female special militant brigade, through which she recruits women in Raqqa in Syria, represents another level of the dynamic of her hunting for vulnerable women.

Conclusion

Fatiha symbolizes a new dimension of the Islamic State's female militancy, one that transcends the traditional Islamic female roles of "breeding machines" or sexual objects into a new definition of female power and mastery of extremist rhetoric. At present, the female jihadists' role is to offer their bodies as a sacrifice, which the Islamic State can then present to the male jihadists, and on the other end, the male jihadists offer their bodies to the jihadist cause through fighting and dying for their belief. While both genders of jihadists are under the impression of being equal players within the organization, they are both being manipulated by the Islamic State. Fatiha perfectly fits within the Islamic State's reinvented manipulative dimension of female militancy, where women within the organization can still serve the continuity of the organization by reproduction, but at the same time be emotionally detached from the male jihadists in order to accept the fact that he will inevitably be killed or imprisoned. In short, they can define themselves by their roles as widows rather than wives. As a result, female militants can gradually develop a relationship of dependence not with their

husbands, but with the jihadist cause, which will provide them with a new husband after they are inevitably widowed, just as Fatiha has done.

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Notes

1. The movement demanded political reform, and for a new constitution to be implemented to bring democracy to Morocco.
2. Shams documents her sentiments towards her new jihadist husband on a Tumblr called Diary of a Muhajirah at <http://diary-of-a-muhajirah.tumblr.com/>.
3. For more on Ahlam al-Nasr, please see “Ahlam al-Nasr: Islamic State’s Jihadist Poetess,” Militant Leadership Monitor, June 2015, http://mlm.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44108&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=539&cHash=157055bb7b66cf1ddfcf60df344edf42.