



**HANNIBAL RISING:
THE NEW LEADER OF THE JIHADIST PMC
MALHAMA TACTICAL**

iBRABO INC

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YOU MUST FIND HIM™**

Waterloo, ON, Canada

HANNIBAL RISING: The New Leader of the Jihadist PMC Malhama Tactical

“Ali Shishani (aka: Hannibal) has always been the right hand man of Abu Rofiq. If you look back through the image record of Malhama Tactical he is almost always there, but Abu Rofiq with his charismatic personality style often took the limelight.

If Abu Rofiq faked his death again he is now relegated to behind-the-scenes work with Malhama Tactical. If he didn't this will be a true test for Ali Shishani to keep Malhama Tactical going and take center stage.

From a media perspective he appears to have already stepped forward, whether he can maintain Malhama Tactical's reputation as an elite training group is yet to be seen.”

Jeff Weyers

Intelligence Research Analyst @IBRABO



Under New Management

The enigmatic organization known as Malhama Tactical (MT) suffered a grueling loss this past month. Media releases by the group claimed its leader, Abu Rofiq, to have been killed in a bombing raid in Hama, Syria. This is not the first time that the charismatic leader's death has been announced. In 2017 when Syrian, Russian and American aircraft were targeting jihadist groups including the al-Qaeda linked Jabhat al-Nusra, it was a bad time to be a target. And so Abu Rofiq "died" for all intents and purposes, until in 2018 the group was reborn under what was being touted as its new leader Abu Salman. However, despite being heavily concealed by balaclavas, tactical gear and gunny hats, several analysts (including those at iBRABO) noted that it was very apparent that Abu Salman was in fact Abu Rofiq. His voice, tone, speech, mannerisms and even non-concealed portion of the eyes were all the same. So the lie was confirmed and the first attempt at disappearing failed.

Now after another reported death of Abu Rofiq on the 15th of August 2019, we simply cannot be sure whether he is truly dead. However if he isn't, it will be virtually impossible for him to be



in front of the camera as the face of the organization again. Recently Abu Rofiq was noticeably absent from social media compared to other periods in the groups social media communications. This would appear to support the idea that Abu Rofiq was active on the frontline against the Syrian Army. Other MT members began making appearances that had never previously been seen before. Like this German member (left) that was reporting from the front line in Hama and apparently calling for the donation of funds to purchase motorcycles.

Enter Ali Shishani, who has been announced as the new leader of the group on MT's telegram channels. At first introductions there does not appear to be very many details about this new leader from Malhama Tactical itself. However there are pieces of the puzzle that we can draw together. The first being social media posts by Abu Rofiq (Abu Salman) himself on October 22 of 2018. On his Twitter feed Abu Salman posts a video of himself and Ali Shishani demonstrating the use of firearms.

The same Malhama Tactical member in the video (right) purported to be Ali Shishani is seen in numerous images and videos that have been released by the group. Ali Shishani has always been the right hand man of Abu Rofiq. If you look



back through the image record of Malhama Tactical he is almost always there, but Abu Rofiq with his charismatic personality often claimed the limelight. Given the sheer amount of times Shishani is seen assisting in training and promotion of the group he is clearly critical to the organizations functioning. Ali Shishani's appearances with the Malhama Tactical become clear when MT rebooted the group under Rofiq's new alias (Abu Salman) in 2017. In the frenzy of media that followed from Malhama Tactical, it was easy to see that Rofiq and Shishani were in essence the core of the group.

Media Presence

One of the most striking elements of Malhama Tactical is their media presence and persistence. Like many groups MT flourished for many years on social media unabated. It has only been in the last two years that the group has met with greater resistance from social media monitors. One of the more interesting observations of the group is the recent creation of a Malhama Tactical's webpage that was started the 26th of July 2019. The page speaks to the group's achievements and purpose, "Malhama Tactical is the worlds first instructor group from the blessed lands of Sham. We have trained thousands of soldiers". Of note one of the telegram links on the site points its followers to a chat page linked to Shishani. This would be consistent with Shishani's growing media involvement in videos and interviews with the organization.



Screen Capture from Malhama Tactical's website (27 August 2019)

Whoever the creator of the site, it indicates Malhama Tactical's persistence in its social media and web presence. While the group is frequently taken down from social media (including Twitter, Instagram and Telegram) they continually rebuild and adapt. In some cases members would even take on an "analyst" personas to distribute MT's content to the public.

Hannibal the Great



Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of long term monitoring and collection of data on groups is the ability to draw correlations between elements that would otherwise be lost or missed. The same can be said in tracing the origins of Shishani. Looking to the social media record we collected it would appear at least two social media profiles were maintained by Shishani under the name “Hannibal” and



“HannibalGreatMT”. The male featured in many of the profile photos matches that which Abu Salman refers to as Ali Shishani. He has the same face mask that he uses almost exclusively. He has a penchant for western style baseball caps and berets. Shishani also predominantly wears his hair long in most of the images that have been captured of him.

Shishani speaks Arabic, and though his specific origins aren’t clear he is reported to possibly be Chechen. His military capabilities appear to be equal or greater than that of Abu Rofiq as Shishani was featured demonstrating many of the activities shown in the Malhama Tactical videos. We know from one of the first images releases of Shishani by Malhama Tactical since the death of Abu Rofiq that Shishani appears to already be mirroring Abu Rofiq’s media presence (Image Right: with Abu Rofiq above and Ali Shishani below).



Living On The Edge

While the Russian and Syria army are already targeting Malhama Tactical, the fine line that Malhama Tactical rides relates to its continued involvement with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other Jihadist groups. Malhama Tactical's relationship and training of the former al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra is quite clear and documented. As the United States still considers Nusra's spin-off (HTS) a terrorist organization, Malhama Tactical involvement in their training is likely to draw continued attention. American airstrikes suppressing groups dangerous to US interests still occur (though reduced) as seen in the targeting of Hurras al-Din members in June. In fact looking at the training record over the last two years Malhama Tactical has had ever increasing training responsibilities handed to them by HTS. With MT also openly admitting to training the likes of the Turkistan Islamic Party (also a designated terrorist organization), Malhama Tactical is very likely to be considered an active partner in the training of terrorist groups in Syria.

It is unlikely that Shishani will change direction in the groups that Malhama Tactical has provided training support too. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has been the main benefactor of Malhama Tactical's capabilities. However as the Syrian-Russian military offensive increases pressure on Idlib, it will be interesting to see if Malhama Tactical opens their doors to other designated groups more closely under the eye of western intelligence.

From a media perspective Shishani appears to have already stepped forward, whether he can maintain Malhama Tactical reputation as an elite jihadist training organization with the confidence of groups like HTS is yet to be seen.



Pictures of Ali Shishani



About the Analysts



Jeff Weyers is a Senior Analyst with the OSINT Intelligence Research Group iBRABO. Jeff is a **Digital Fellow with the MIGS Institute** (sponsored by the US Embassy in Ottawa) focusing on Online Extremism. He is a **recognized expert in the area of Preventing Violent Extremism and Open Source Intelligence**. He is a **2019 Premier's Award Nominee** for Community Service in his dedication to public safety. In 2017 He was awarded Alumnus of the Year at Laurier University for his work as a **standing member of the Pentagon's strategic multi-layer assessment panel** in the fight against ISIS/ISIL where he is a regular contributor.

Jeff holds a Post-Graduate Certificate in Intelligence and Security Studies from the University of Ottawa, a Diploma in Law and Security Administration from Conestoga College, a

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Dr. Camie Condon is the **academic coordinator for the Intelligence and Crime Analysis degree program** at Seneca College. Camie was the Scholar in Residence with Wilfrid Laurier University in Police Bachelors program and a part-time faculty member in the Dept. of Psychology. She has an extensive background in crime analysis and intelligence research with iBRABO in addition **to over 11 years as a police crime analyst**.

Camie has been the recipient of the 2005 **Woman of the Year** award for excellence in teaching and has been awarded the Excellence in Teaching award from Wilfrid Laurier University.

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Authors' Note: This report is a not-for-profit undertaking by the open source research group iBRABO and the analysts associated with it. The research was not undertaken at the direction of any institution, government agent, or member of the public. Content and images presented were taken from open, and freely available, internet sources and the analysis is solely the opinion of the iBRABO analyst team. The information in this report demonstrates the value of open source intelligence techniques in generating critical questions and opening necessary dialogue. For more information contact iBRABO@pm.me



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