



Malhama Tactical

The Evolving Role of Jihadist Mercenaries in the
Syrian Conflict

Alessandro Arduino and Nodirbek Soliev

Series Introduction

The Changing Character of War in the Middle East and Beyond

Since the privatisation of the American war in Iraq, the commercial market for force in the Middle East has grown exponentially, raising critical regulatory concerns. In addition to protecting people and infrastructure, for instance along China's Belt and Road, some security contractors now even perform combat-related services such as communications support and drone operations. While professional contractors promise greater flexibility and cost-efficiency than traditional armies do, we have also seen shadowy contractors and mercenaries being deployed with plausible deniability by the likes of Russia and Turkey in places like Syria and Iraq.

This series of *Insights* brings together academics and industry practitioners to explore the possibilities and challenges presented by such privatisation of the state's monopoly on the use of force.

Cover photo: Screenshot from Malhama Tactical's YouTube channel

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Alessandro Arduino and Nodirbek Soliev*

Malhama Tactical, an unusual militant group operating in Syria and sometimes labelled the "Blackwater of jihad", is run for profit and advertises itself on social media network as the first jihadist private military training company. The group is comprised largely of jihadist veterans from the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union and Russia, notably, Chechnya, as well as several Arabic-speaking fighters from elsewhere. Following the death of its founding leader, Malhama Tactical is evolving towards a hybrid nature: a training outfit that also participates in kinetic actions.

Malhama Tactical, a militant group operating in Syria, achieved notoriety in 2017 as the world's first jihadist mercenary outfit. Labelled the "Blackwater of Jihad", it was for long more inclined towards the private military company model instead of that of a conventional jihadist fighting group. It projected itself as a commercial enterprise focusing on training jihadis and until recently refrained from getting involved in direct military action. In spite of its small size and a recent leadership transition, it has not only managed to survive but also

emerged as a key jihadist training force for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an Al Qaida–linked jihadist alliance in Syria.

However, following the death of its founding leader in August 2019 and the subsequent emergence of a new leader, Ali al-Shishani, Malhama Tactical has seen an evolution towards a hybrid nature: while retaining its commercial function as a training outfit, the group also has started to participate in active fighting since December 2019.

As Malhama Tactical evolves, there is disturbing evidence that newer organisations following in its initial footsteps are emerging. With the changing security architecture in the Middle East, conflict-ridden regions like Libya and Yemen could serve as new markets for jihadist mercenaries to seek their fortunes. Likewise, the resurgence of terrorist groups in Africa could make the region conducive to the growth of jihadist mercenaries.

Origins and Objectives

The story of Malhama Tactical’s founder, a former soldier from the Russian special air forces (Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska or VD, for short), reads like an action movie. Born to a family of Meskhetian Turks in Kyrgyzstan, Abu Rofiq — whose real name was Sukhrob Baltabaev — founded Malhama Tactical in March 2016. He led observers to believe he was killed in 2017 during a Russian airstrike in Syria that had targeted him. However, he resurfaced a year later using the false name of “Abu Salman al-Belarusi” to evade Russian detection. The ruse did not help him for long: in August 2019, Abu Rofiq was reported to have been killed in Idlib in a bomb attack by the Russian air force, which supports

the ground operations of Syrian government forces. His death was later officially confirmed by Malhama Tactical.¹

“For Chechen-led groups like Malhama Tactical, Syria is partly an extension of their domestic armed separatist battle against Russia, which is supporting the Syrian government.”

Since the group’s early days, its growing affiliation with HTS and the fact that it has been led by jihadists from the Muslim regions both of Russia and the former Soviet Union oriented Malhama Tactical towards the support of militants fighting the Syrian government and its allies, Russia and Iran. The group stated on social media that its objective was “to protect the oppressed people and the destruction of tyranny” by turning the Syrian “resistance forces into a high-class army”.²

For Chechen-led groups like Malhama Tactical, Syria is partly an extension of their domestic armed separatist battle against Russia, which is supporting the Syrian government. Photos circulated in October 2019 via various social media platforms, including Twitter, featured members of Malhama Tactical wearing military uniforms and brandishing the flag and logos of “Ichkeria”, the historical name for the region encompassing the highlands of eastern Chechnya. Chechen separatist and jihadist

¹ “Head of jihadist training outfit Malhama Tactical reportedly killed in Syria”, BBC Monitoring, 5 September 2019.

² “Ali ash-Shishani: ‘Like all Chechens in Syria, I miss Chechnya’”, Interview with *Newcaucasus*, 9 October 2019, <http://newcaucasus.com/in-english/18201-ali-al-shishani-like-all-chechens-in-syria-i-miss-chechnya.html>

groups usually refer to Chechnya as Ickheria as a symbolic reflection of their ethno-nationalist and Islamist separatist goals for Chechnya. In a November 2019 interview with Joanna Paraszczuk, an independent analyst focused on Russian-speaking fighters in Syria, al-Shishani claimed that by fighting against Syrian government forces, Chechen jihadists were seeking to weaken Russia so that “their homeland” could be liberated.³

A New Leader

Although Ali al-Shishani claims Chechnya to be his birthplace, not much is known about his life before his migration to Syria in 2013.⁴ It was reported that, like Abu Rofiq, al-Shishani was from the Russian VDV.⁵ In Syria, he had first joined a pro–Al Qaida faction led by a notorious Chechen jihadist veteran from Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge, Sayfullah Shishani. After Sayfullah was killed in 2014, al-Shishani joined Ajnad al Kavkaz, a Chechen-led jihadist group in northern Syria, before eventually joining Malhama Tactical. It is worth mentioning that all the groups that al-Shishani has fought alongside in Syria are known to have had links to HTS and its predecessor, al-Nusra Front.

Although many expected that Abu Rofiq’s death would be a serious blow to the group, al-Shishani has continued to adhere to the

³ Interview with Chechen mujahideen in Syria, carried in personal blog of Joanna Paraszczuk titled *From Chechnya to Syria*, 7 November 2019, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=26337>

⁴ Joanna Paraszczuk’s interview with Ali al-Shishani, interviewer’s personal blog titled *From Chechnya to Syria*, 12 September 2019, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=26323>

⁵ “Novyy lider “Mal’khama Taktikal” lichno treniruyet boyevikov dlya boyev v yuzhnom Idlib” (“Malhama Tactical’s new leader personally trains fighters for combat in southern Idlib”), *Warsonline*, 12 September 2019, <https://warsonline.info/siriia/novosti/siriia/malhama-tactical-110919-1.html>.

ethos of its founder, while maintaining the unity of the group and securing the confidence of the HTS leadership. This was evident when he was seen in March 2020 with HTS's military spokesman, Abu Khalid as-Shami.

“A pro–Al Qaida Telegram channel, Abbottabad Documents, described Malhama Tactical as ‘the elite of the elite forces’.”

Many images and videos released online by Malhama Tactical before the killing of Abu Rofiq featured al-Shishani with him, indicating that al-Shishani was the right-hand man of the group's founding leader. His closeness to Abu Rofiq and fighting experience with various other groups prior to joining Malhama Tactical have evidently been key factors in his rapid ascent within the group.

A Force Multiplier

Under al-Shishani's leadership, Malhama Tactical has maintained its primary role as a force multiplier that provides tactical training to HTS and its affiliates. Praising the group for this role, a pro–Al Qaida Telegram channel, Abbottabad Documents, described Malhama Tactical as “the elite of the elite forces”.⁶ In exchange, Malhama Tactical has received support and protection from HTS.

⁶ “Leader of jihadi military contractor Malhama Tactical (MT) killed in Syria”, Freerepublic.com, 20 August 2019, available via *Memri*, <https://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/3773228/posts>

Al-Shishani has played a core role in Malhama Tactical's training team, appearing in dozens of training videos and manuals. According to him, the main operational goal of the group is to train rebels in Syria in modern warfare tactics.⁷ In February 2020, al-Shishani claimed that approximately 5,000 fighters had undergone training under his group.⁸

Malhama Tactical has gradually diversified its list of military services while also adopting new methods in its training activities. The group has provided combat training ranging from basic infantry skirmish to advanced tactics as well as the use of re-engineered Chinese commercial drones for scouting or as loitering munitions (aka "kamikaze drones"). It now even employs mini portable projectors to run its theoretical courses in the field.

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Since 2017, the group has improved its training materials. These include professional-grade video clips shot from aerial drones and how-to guides on disassembling and maintaining assault rifles or operating rocket and missile launchers. The group also has created its own manuals on aspects ranging from the deployment of improvised explosives to the efficient use of rocket-propelled grenade rounds in vehicle penetration. In a video released in November 2019, a Malhama Tactical instructor

⁷ Joanna Paraszczuk's interview with Ali al-Shishani.

⁸ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's interview with Ali al-Shishani, interviewer's personal blog, 26 February 2020, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/02/malhama-tactical-interview>

demonstrated a new do-it-yourself bulletproof vest. Although the group's production capacity in this respect is not clear, what is most interesting is that it is capable of making such vests on its own.

Malhama Tactical has shown some private sector corporate ethos. During some of its practical training sessions, it conducts competitions and offers gifts to winning fighters: for example, a weapon sling for the winner, an extended magazine release for the first runner-up, and a Bakelite magazine for the second runner-up.

Composition and Clientele

Although Malhama Tactical's initial core was composed of battle-hardened foreign fighters from Russia's north Caucasus and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), its ethnic composition has become highly diversified in recent years. The group's leadership claims to have instructors from Syria and other Middle Eastern countries, including Turkey, along with those from Central, East and Southeast Asia, as well as Europe.⁹ With some having military or insurgency backgrounds, the group's instructors provide combat training to both new recruits and experienced ones. According to al-Shishani, to become a member of his team, one is required to have the necessary abilities, fighting experience and recommendations from someone the group trusts.

With a client pool exclusively selected from factions fighting under HTS, Malhama Tactical has trained dozens of local and foreign units, including Maldivians and Uyghurs. (Although Malhama Tactical has occasionally called for attacks against China, its threats have not gone

⁹ "Ali ash-Shishani: 'Like all Chechens in Syria, I miss Chechnya'".

beyond training and the spread of online anti-Chinese rhetoric.) Among the elite jihadist units that the group has trained in Syria so far are two battle-hardened HTS commando units, known as Asaib al-Mawt (“Death Leagues”) and Asaib al-Hamra (“Red Bandanas”). HTS’s German fighting unit is among the group’s clients. Some of Malhama Tactical’s trainees have since become instructors in their own groups.

In line with the changing ethnic composition of the group and of its clientele, Malhama Tactical’s new training manuals are mostly in Arabic, not Russian. Also, the training sessions are conducted in the languages that the clients speak.

Change in Stance: Participation in Battle

For most of its existence, Malhama Tactical focused on training and avoided getting involved in fighting on the ground. That stance changed in December 2019, when it temporarily suspended its training activities and joined the fighting as Syria and Russia stepped up pressure on Idlib, one of the last major rebel strongholds in Syria.¹⁰

Operating mainly in the north of Hama and in the southern parts of Idlib, Malhama Tactical teams were assigned the task of reconnaissance and air defence.¹¹ For instance, the group conducted reconnaissance operations, mostly using commercial unmanned aerial vehicles, to support a counter-offensive led by Turkish-backed militants

¹⁰ The group explained that the decision to fight was made “to focus on military assistance projects at the frontlines due to the start of a new offensive by Russia and the Assad regime on Greater Idlib”. This explanation, which was circulated in online chats at that time, is not widely available.

¹¹ Joanna Paraszcuk’s interview with Ali al-Shishani.

who aimed to recapture the town of Saraqib in Idlib from Syrian government forces.

Malhama Tactical also engaged in armed aerial drone support and manned air defences against increasing Russian airstrikes in Syria. Al-Shishani claimed that during one such operation in August 2019 his team was able to shoot down a Syrian air force SU-22 fighter plane, leading to the capture of the ejected pilot by the group's jihadist partners on the ground.¹²

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In October 2019, Malhama Tactical posted an online video showing fighters allegedly in Idlib deploying a Chinese commercial drone, DJI Mavic Pro, equipped with high-definition cameras. Other propaganda material showed the drone scouting Syrian army positions near Hama in June 2019.

As noted earlier, before 2019, Malhama Tactical militants had only acted as tactical consultants on the battlefield. Some jihadist groups criticised Malhama Tactical for not participating in the fighting. In response, al-Shishani argued that Malhama Tactical had fulfilled its obligation to fight through its training activities. The criticism, however, stopped once Malhama Tactical engaged on the battlefield although the group has since resumed its training activities.

¹² “Ali ash-Shishani: ‘Like all Chechens in Syria, I miss Chechnya.’”

In an interview conducted by Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, an independent researcher who studies jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, al-Shishani criticised mujahedeen commanders for not being able to keep the “unity between the factions” and also emphasised their “military incompetence”.¹³ He noted that the mujahedeen’s loss of territory in Syria was due not only to Russian support for the Syrian government but also to the “lack of cooperation and strategic coordination” among the various groups. The interview could be perceived as a hint that training by Malhama Tactical training could fill the competence gap.

“One interesting aspect of Malhama Tactical is its leadership’s manifest thirst for publicity.”

Notwithstanding its growing battlefield cooperation and links with HTS, Malhama Tactical has refrained from pledging allegiance to HTS’s leader, Abu Mohammad al-Julani. This could be in line with Malhama Tactical’s repeated insistence on its independent status in Syria.¹⁴ Presumably, an independent status would give the group the leeway to continue serving as a private military company ready to provide its services wherever there is a market opportunity. Another possible explanation could be related to the group’s attempts not to be seen associated with terrorism.¹⁵ Pledging allegiance to HTS, which both

¹³ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi’s interview with Ali al-Shishani

¹⁴ Joanna Paraszczuk’s interview with Ali al-Shishani.

¹⁵ OGN TV (Syria) YouTube channel, “Ali Shishani, Chechen leader of the Malhama Tactical military contractor group: Our goal is to support the Syrian people against the regime; Russia, Assad, ISIS are terrorists; We have a favorable attitude towards Turkey, Erdoğan”, (Syria) interview with al-Shishani, 11 June 2020, available via *Memri*, 16 June

the United Nations and United States have designated an Al Qaida–linked group, may lead to the imposition of legal and financial sanctions against the group, which would significantly degrade its fundraising activities out of Syria.

Outreach

Until recently, Malhama Tactical group had a considerable social media presence. Most of the available information on the group could be gleaned from its Russian language blogs. It also had an active presence on online platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook but these companies have since taken down its pages.

With the changing composition of Malhama Tactical and its expanding client profile, the group has expanded its online outreach activities by posting in Russian, Arabic, English and German. Given its predominant Arab and Turkish base, it has of late stepped up its Arabic and Turkish-language propaganda and advertising.

One interesting aspect of Malhama Tactical is its leadership’s manifest thirst for media publicity. This was made clear in al-Shishani’s call early last year for greater media coverage of his group’s activities in Syria.¹⁶ It is further evidenced by the series of published interviews (audio, video and written) given by both al-Shishani and Abu Rofiq to various researchers and online platforms. With greater publicity and by positioning itself as a non-terrorist group helping to protect Syria’s

2020, <https://www.memri.org/reports/ali-shishani-chechen-leader-malhama-tactical-military-contractor-group-our-goal-support>

¹⁶ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi’s interview with Ali al-Shishani.

“oppressed Muslims”, the group may be hoping to boost its fundraising efforts among its supporters and sympathisers across the world.

Fundraising

Malhama Tactical funds itself from the proceeds of its training services as well as donations from abroad. Its fundraising channels include posters, written appeals and online platforms and social networking sites such as the Russian VKontakte and Odnoklassniki and, until recently, Telegram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. The funds are transferred through online payment services such as Wallet One and QIWI Koshelek or in the form of online cryptocurrencies.

New sources of funding have allegedly come about since 2018 from areas far from the Syrian battlefield, including Indonesian charities such as the Abu Ahmed Foundation (AAF), a non-governmental fundraiser. AAF announced several rounds of online fundraising for Malhama Tactical from October 2018, a time when Malhama Tactical was “in need of help” to purchase training airsoft rifles and to build a new training camp so that “*muhajireen* could undergo their special training”.¹⁷ In a video statement released in September 2019 on Twitter, al-Shishani expressed his gratitude for donations he claimed to have received from AAF.¹⁸ It is unclear how AAF funnelled the funds to Malhama Tactical.

In July 2018, Malhama Tactical, in conjunction with HTS’ German fighters, announced an online fundraising campaign seeking to

¹⁷ Nodirbek Soliev, “Charity for ‘Jihad’ in Syria: The Indonesian-Uyghur Connection”, *RSIS Commentary*, 12 March 2020, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/CO20037.pdf>

¹⁸ Nodirbek Soliev, “Charity for ‘Jihad’ in Syria”.

raise thousands of Euros to buy customised motorbikes for use in military training. A new German-speaking member of Malhama Tactical was actively looking at European audiences, both for recruiting and fundraising purposes.

“In order to circumvent increasing counterterrorism financing obstacles, Malhama Tactical has started to explore alternative ways of raising funds.”

But Malhama Tactical’s fundraising and propaganda capability has been partially impaired of late with YouTube, Twitter and Facebook having taken down its pages. In order to circumvent increasing counterterrorism financing obstacles, the group has started to explore alternative ways of raising funds. According to a criminal complaint before the US District Court for the District of Columbia in August 2020, Malhama Tactical was one of the beneficiaries of a cyber-enabled fundraising campaign by a group known as Al Ikhwa.¹⁹ The court documents state that, although Al Ikhwa presents itself as an “independent charity that does not support any acts of terrorism”, evidence has “demonstrated otherwise”. Al Ikhwa reportedly used multi-layered cyber transactions to raise and move donations to a central hub

¹⁹ “United States’ Verified Complaint for Forfeiture in *REM*,” a criminal complaint unsealed by the US District Court for the District of Columbia, USA, on 5 August 2020, Press release, US Department of Justice, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1304296/download>

of crypto addresses, from which funds were then moved to cash-out locations in Syria.²⁰

A New Kid on the Block

While Malhama Tactical under its new leadership is veering from its previous private military orientation, new groups are looking to emulate the old Malhama Tactical model. In July 2019, a group known as Chechen Tactical made its first appearance in Idlib province. Chechen Tactical is part of Liwa al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (Brigade of Emigrants and Supporters or LMA, for short), another jihadist group predominantly made up of Chechens from the Caucasus.²¹ Known formerly as Jaish al-Mujahideen wal-Ansar, LMA operates under the umbrella of HTS in Idlib.

While Chechen Tactical has not risen to become as prominent as Malhama Tactical among jihadist networks operating in Syria, its fighters claimed to fight for the “defence of the weak” and to “establish the laws of Shari’a”.²² In a Twitter comment posted in March 2020, a Chechen Tactical member ignored his group’s orders forbidding links

²⁰ “Chainalysis in action: Department of Justice announces take down of two terrorism financing campaigns with help from Blockchain analysis”, *Mondo Visione*, 13 August 2020, <https://mondovisione.com/media-and-resources/news/chainalysis-in-action-department-of-justice-announces-takedown-of-two-terrorism>; and “Global Disruption of Three Terror Finance Cyber-Enabled Campaigns”, UD Department of Justice, 13 August 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/global-disruption-three-terror-finance-cyber-enabled-campaigns>

²¹ Joanna Paraszczuk’s interview with Chechen Tactical, Chechen mujahid with Liwa Muhajireen wal Ansar, interviewer’s personal blog titled *From Chechnya to Syria*, 3 June 2020, <https://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=26387>

²² Joanna Paraszczuk’s interview with Chechen Tactical, Chechen mujahid with Liwa Muhajireen wal Ansar.

with Malhama Tactical. That such an order exists suggests that, in spite of the aforementioned similarities, there is limited prospect for cooperation between the two groups for now.

Whither Malhama Tactical?

As this study has shown, owing to their considerably small size, jihadist mercenary outfits like Malhama Tactical and Chechen Tactical depend on the support and protection of bigger groups for their continued survival. In June 2020, al-Shishani claimed that Malhama Tactical would abide by the ceasefire agreed by Turkey and Russia over Idlib as the group saw the arrangement as “necessary” and also because they would “act in accordance with the authority of the local factions”.²³ This claim, being in line with HTS’ stance on the ceasefire, indicates the degree to which Malhama Tactical depends on the protection of HTS and accepts its authority. The fate of the two groups in Syria will thus be determined by their future relations with their respective protectors (HTS and LMA) and by the kind of role the latter play in the Syrian conflict in future. If these protectors collapse or are defeated by the Syrian government, the status of Malhama Tactical and Chechen Tactical could be thrown into doubt.

For now, in accordance with the priorities of HTS, Malhama Tactical remains focused on Syria, while dedicating itself to commercial training and fundraising activities. However, as suggested above, depending on the dynamics on the ground, its members may participate

²³ OGN TV (Syria) YouTube channel, “Ali Shishani, Chechen leader of the Malhama Tactical military contractor group: Our goal is to support the Syrian people against the regime”.

in battlefield operations from time to time. This means the group could retain its hybrid nature.

Outlook

The rise of groups like Malhama Tactical and Chechen Tactical is disturbing for three reasons:

- (i) The demonstration effect. They provide a model for other groups along the following lines — avoid involvement in active combat as far as possible, brand as a mere training force, and circumvent anti-terrorism laws to facilitate collecting funds from those sympathetic to jihadi causes.
- (ii) Their exportability. What makes jihadi mercenaries more dangerous than traditional jihadi outfits is that they are not wedded to any geographic area or specific ideology; hence they can infiltrate a variety of conflict zones and provide military support to a range of militias in the Muslim world without demanding political space.
- (iii) The employment prospects they offer. Groups like Malhama Tactical could serve as magnets for out-of-job combatants displaced by the end of conflicts or by the collapse of their previous organisations.

The changing Middle East security architecture is facilitating the influx of traditional mercenary groups. Not only is Syria witnessing the mercenaries plague but so is Libya as well. The influx of mercenaries from Syria into Libya is relatively recent as veterans of the Syrian conflict cross the border into Libya in their fight for cash. In this case, mercenaries on in both countries are recruiting Syrian fighters into their

ranks. Another worrying prospect is that mercenary groups like Malhama Tactical and Chechen Tactical could slowly infiltrate the African continent as terrorist groups like Al Qaida and the Islamic State focus on African nations such as Mali, Niger, Mauritania and Somalia. This means that groups moulded in Malhama Tactical's image will soon be able not only to find new venues for profit in Africa but will also help to increase the operational reach of these terrorist groups. ◆

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