

Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) Jihadis and Affiliated Commanders

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1. Jihadi Mercenary Leaders

A. *Sayf Balud*, also known as [Sayf Abu Bakr](#) ([Twitter account](#))

Balud has been the leader of the Syrian National Army (SNA)'s Hamza Division since roughly [2016](#), which participated in [Operation Olive Branch](#) (Afrin) and more recently the [Libyan Civil War](#), both with [Turkish patronage](#). He and ~500 of his men were [reportedly](#) flown in to Azerbaijan to take part in the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh (N-K). Balud is a [Syrian Turkman](#), a characteristic often necessary to gain Turkish trust in "sensitive" operations (such as recent proxy conflicts). In 2013, [he appeared in an ISIS propaganda video](#) and was associated with it around that time, though potentially as a [Turkish plant](#). Balud and his division have been responsible for multiple war crimes, including [kidnapping Kurdish women](#) and brutal repression in Afrin. One of Turkey's most [trusted and supported](#) mercenary leaders.

Sources: [Jamestown Foundation](#); [Naharnet](#); [Middle East Eye](#); [USC-Dornsife Institute of Armenian Studies](#) (IAS); [Daily Beast](#); [Guardian](#); [Aymenn Jawadd](#); [National Post](#); [Kurdistan24](#); [ArmenPress](#)

B. *Fehim Isa*, possibly also known as [Isa al-Turkmani](#) ([Twitter account](#))

Isa has led the SNA's Sultan Murad Division since at least [2015](#), through which he has been directly involved in [Operation Euphrates Shield](#), [Operation Olive Branch](#), and the [Libyan Civil War](#). Like Balud, he has enjoyed [Turkish patronage](#) and is an [ethnic Turkman](#). His division was also at some point [armed by the US](#), though his involvement in this is unknown. According to reports, he and his division have also [engaged in N-K](#) with support from Turkey. There were rumors of Isa's resignation in 2017, however by early 2018 he was [confirmed](#) as Sultan Murad's commander. He and his division have also been accused of multiple war crimes, such as the [torturing](#) of Kurdish soldiers and [indiscriminate shelling](#) of civilians.

Sources: [Reuters](#) (1); [Sultan Murad Division website](#) (1); [ISW](#); [al-Monitor](#); [Independent](#); [IAS](#); [Daily Beast](#); [Reuters](#) (2); [Guardian](#); [Sultan Murad Division Website](#) (2); [AraNews](#); [Amnesty International](#); [Rudaw](#)

C. *Abu Amsha*, real name [Muhammad al-Jassim](#)

Amsha is the leader of the Suleyman Shah Brigade, nicknamed the al-Amshat militia, which gained prominence ~2018 as one of the [most brutal factions](#) occupying Afrin with Turkish support. In Afrin, al-Amshat supposedly [confiscated property](#), [kidnapped](#) individuals for ransom, [looted, raped, and murdered](#). Amsha has been directly implicated in these war crimes, [making 12 million dollars in a year](#) off of ransoms and being [accused of rape and murder](#). [Turkish protection](#) has reportedly allowed him to avoid punishment for these acts. He is also a [Syrian Turkman](#), like Isa and Balud. Following Afrin, Amsha has also been an [important recruiter](#) for Turkish-backed mercenaries in [Libya](#), and he and his division have [fought in N-K](#) at Turkish request.

Sources: [VDC-NSY](#); [Lindsey Snell](#); [Kurdistan24](#); SyriaHR (1, 2, 3); [AfrinPost](#); [Independent](#); [ISPI](#); [Asia News](#)

D. Others (no direct link to N-K, but to organizations fighting there)

a. *Ahmed Osman*, another [military leader](#) of the Sultan Murad Division who was involved in [Operation Euphrates Shield](#), [Operation Olive Branch](#), and the [Libyan Civil War](#).

b. *Abu Jalal*, once a [military leader](#) of the Hamza Division; current status unknown.

c. *Hasan Abdullah Kulli*, [leader of the Kurdish Falcons Brigade](#) of the Hamza Division, which exists to [shift the reputation](#) of Turkish assaults on PKK/YPG from being anti-Kurdish to “anti-terrorist”. Kulli was key in Afrin as a [translator](#).

d. *Mohammad al-Abdullah*, [described in 2016](#) as the Hamza Division’s “Head of Political Bureau”.

e. *Fadlallah al-Haji*, a [Turkish protégé](#) and head of Faylaq al-Sham, an important Turkish proxy [fighting in Syria, Libya, and N-K](#). Al-Haji and his men have [connections](#) to the Muslim Brotherhood and [fought with al-Qaeda](#) in Idlib. May have [resigned](#) in November 2020.

Sources: [OHCHR](#); [VOA News](#); [al-Monitor](#); [RFS Media Office](#); [Middle East Eye](#); [Zaman Al Wasl](#); [Arab Weekly](#); [Barrons](#); [Washington Institute](#)

2. Turkish Commanders and Other Personnel

A. Major General *Bahtiyar Ersay*

Ersay, whose [title](#) is officially “Chief of the Operations Directorate of the Land Forces of Turkey,” [oversaw](#) the Azerbaijani General Staff in N-K following the [sacking of former Azerbaijani Chief of Staff Najmeddin Sadikov](#). He previously led the [2nd Commando Brigade](#) against the PKK, which was [notoriously cruel](#) against Kurdish civilians and soldiers (and contained Grey Wolves elements in it). Ersay was also involved in [Syria](#) and [Libya](#), potentially [recruiting and overseeing the mercenaries](#) that fought there. Because of this and his commando past, he is likely the Turkish commander most directly involved with these jihadi mercenaries. Ersay was also implicated in [Operation Sledgehammer](#), an early-2000s coup attempt against Erdogan – however, he was [released without serving much of his sentence](#) and the facts of his case remain unclear.

Sources: [Memri](#); [OSCE](#); [Asbarez](#); [Hurriyet](#)

B. Lieutenant General *Şeref Öngay*

Öngay is the [Commander of the Third Army of the Turkish Ground Forces](#). While there is little out there about his past, Öngay had his [contract extended](#) at a time when Erdogan was purging the military, which implies trust from and loyalty to the higher-ups. The Armenian delegation at [OSCE](#) say he “took part in planning and conducting” N-K operations, was also [spotted in Azerbaijan](#) on 4 September 2020 (right before the N-K conflict broke out) to participate in joint operations with the Azerbaijani military. However, any connection Öngay has to mercenaries is purely speculative, though one could imagine if he planned operations, he knows about them and may have commanded them along with Ersay.

Sources: [Atalayar](#); [OSCE](#); [Turan](#); [Memri](#)

C. Major General *Göksel Kahya*

Kahya is an important Turkish drone commander who heads the [Turkish Air Force’s 1st Supply and Maintenance Center](#). Prior to the N-K conflict, he was [instrumental in command](#) of Bayraktar TB2 drones (powerful Turkish-made and developed drones) in the Libyan Civil War. This drone expertise was then [shifted to Azerbaijan](#), where he has resided since July 2020 and [oversaw](#) the well-documented [use of TB2 drones in N-K](#). These drones both were [instrumental](#) for the Azerbaijani victory in the conflict and [devastating for human rights](#) (e.g., civilian targeting, especially at night). While his involvement with the Syrian mercenaries is likely to be less than Ersay and Öngay, Kahya was still instrumental to the conflict and responsible for many human rights abuses.

Sources: [Memri](#); [al-Marsad](#); [Geopolitical Cyprus](#) (translated); [OSCE](#); [CSIS](#); [Human Rights Defender of Armenia](#); [Washington Post](#)

D. Adnan Tanrıverdi

Tanrıverdi is a retired Turkish general and the founder of [SADAT Inc.](#) International Defense Consultancy, a private defense contracting company started in 2012. He was forced to resign from the military in [1996](#) due to Islamist affiliations and has filled SADAT with [other hardline Islamists](#). Tanrıverdi has also held significant influence over Erdogan, allegedly using SADAT to help [prevent a coup in 2016](#) and, following this, [helping re-organize](#) the Turkish Armed Forces. As a result, SADAT has been referred to as a “[shadow military](#)” by some. Reportedly, he and SADAT have played an important role in recruiting, equipping, and transporting Syrian mercenaries (~[3000 fighters](#)) to both Libya and [N-K](#). Though he lacks any official position in the Turkish government/military, his [influence is significant](#) and could be looked into more.

Sources: [SADAT website](#); [SOFREP](#); [Duvar English](#); [Ahval](#); [Atalayar](#); [al-Monitor](#)

3. Azerbaijani Commanders

NOTE: Could find nothing linking these commanders to Syrian mercenaries directly, however they seem to be the most important Azerbaijani commanders in N-K and therefore they probably have knowledge of the jihadis and command some of them

A. Major General *Hikmat Hasanov*

Hasanov is the [Commander of the 1st Army Corps of Azerbaijan](#), which covered the northern frontline of the N-K conflict. He was [instrumental](#) in capturing Suqovuşan and other northern targets early in the war. [Multi-lingual and well-travelled](#), Hasanov is a member of a [younger generation](#) of Azerbaijani generals who lack connections to the former Soviet Union; this has allowed him to rise in the ranks as pro-Russian generals (e.g., Sadikov) get removed from their posts. He was also an [important commander](#) in the 2016 N-K conflict.

Sources: [Jamestown Institute](#); [AzVision](#) (translated)

B. Major General *Mais Barkhudarov*

Barkhudarov is the [Commander of the 2nd Army Corps of Azerbaijan](#), which covered the southern frontline in the N-K conflict. Along with Hikmat Mirzayev (see below), he was [instrumental](#) in capturing Jabrayil. Like Hasanov, he is a member of the [younger generation](#) of Azerbaijani generals. Barkhudarov was an important commander in the [2016 N-K conflict](#) as well, during which he helped capture [Lalatapa Heights](#). The Azerbaijani press has glorified him significantly – see [here](#).

Sources: [Jamestown Institute](#); [Press Service of the President of Azerbaijan](#); [Azxeber](#) (translated)

C. Lieutenant General Hikmat Mirzayev

Mirzayev is the [highest ranking](#) of the three generals mentioned here and is the [head of the Azerbaijani special forces](#), which were instrumental in their country's success in the [2016](#) and [2020](#) wars. Many special forces members were also [trained by Turkey](#), and therefore Mirzayev has likely worked with the Turkish high command in the past. With Turkish backing, special forces were also [utilized much more](#) in 2020 than in 2016. Following the recent conflict, Mirzayev was [promoted to Lieutenant General](#) due to his importance and success during it. Unclear what generation of commanders he is from; however, he is clearly in good standing with both the Turks and Azerbaijanis.

Sources: [Azerbaijan24](#) (1); [Azerbaijan24](#) (2, translated); [RadioFreeEurope](#)