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The Mastermind of the Sri Lankan Easter Sunday Attacks: A Brief Sketch of Mohammed Zahran Hashim of National Thowheeth Jama'ath

Animesh Roul

Following the April 21 Easter Sunday attacks on churches and hotels in Sri Lanka that killed over 250 people and injured many more, the Sri Lankan authorities and a devastated populace are still left with troubling questions. How had this unheard of 'Islamic extremism' reach its shores unnoticed and who nurtured this deadly strain of jihad in the country?

While initial investigations unearthed evidence of the involvement of little known local Salafi jihadist groups National Thowheeth Jamaat (NTJ) and Jamathei Milathu Ibrahim (JMI), on April 23 Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility through its Amaq news agency. The 59-second Amaq video prominently featured Muhammad Zahran Hashim, a.k.a Abu Ubeida, spiritual

leader of the NTJ and the mastermind behind the mayhem, along with seven others pledging allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Two suicide bombings at the Shangri-La Hotel in Colombo were carried out by Hashim and Mohammad Ibrahim Ilham of JMI ([Ada Derana News](#) [Colombo], May 21). The rest of the suicide bombers have since been identified, including Mohammad Ibrahim Inshaf (brother of Ilham), Mohamed Hasthun, Ahmed Muaz, and Abdul Latif Jameel Mohammed ([News.Lk](#), May 21). Intriguingly, except for Hashim—who was clearly leading other members in that IS fealty video—the other attackers covered their faces and dressed in black tunic and monochrome headscarves. The video to some extent proves that both NTJ and JMI members are part of a covert network inspired by transnational jihadist ideals espoused by IS.

Hashim was born in 1985 to a poor Muslim family in the coastal town of Kattankudy. During his education at the Jamiathul Falah Arabic regular madrasa, in the township of Kattankudy,

he was exposed to literature on the fundamentals of Islam, especially Towheedism or Islamic monotheism. After dropping out in 2007 due to his rebellious nature and his radical views on Islam, Hashim joined the Ibn Mas'ood Madrasa in Kurunegala, which is the capital city of the North Western Province, and later became a member of Sri Lanka Toawheed Jamaath (SLTJ) ([Sunday Times](#), April 28). The SLTJ has been operational under another Islamic cleric, Abdul Razik.

Zahran Hashim was also associated with another organization, Dar-ul-Athar, which was founded by his like-minded mentor Nowfar Maulavi. However, Zaharan Hashim parted with this group due to a conflict of interest, and went on to set up NTJ sometimes in 2012 ([News First](#), May 1). A controversial figure within the Muslim community in Kattankudy and nearby localities, Zahran Hashim succeeded in pushing his followers towards a violent strain of Islam.

He proclaimed himself a cleric and a preacher of monotheist Islam. A natural orator himself and well versed in both Arabic and Tamil, he established his own mosque in the town and led regular Friday prayers and sermons. His influence spread to the other parts of Sri Lanka, the southern states of neighboring India—especially Tamil Nadu—and possibly to the Maldives ([Daily Mirror](#), April 27).

Hashim was well known for giving incendiary speeches on social media sites, including YouTube and Facebook. The cleric had several thousand online followers.

Though there is conflicting information on the NTJ's actual formation, both Razik and Hashim

have long engaged in sectarian confrontation with Buddhist vigilante groups over socio-religious issues under the banner of SLTJ. Late last year in December 2018, Hashim exhorted NTJ members during a Friday prayer to attack Buddhist and Christian places of worships. This reportedly resulted in a three-day-long rampage where several Buddha shrines and statues in Mawanella were vandalized ([Colombo Page](#), November 16, 2016; [Colombo Telegraph](#), December 28, 2018). Before the Mawanella vandalism, Hashim came to public attention in March 2017, during clashes between NTJ members and followers of Sufi cleric Moulavi Abdul Rauf at the Aliyar junction in Kattankudy ([Colombo Telegraph](#), March 14, 2017). He reportedly went underground following the violence and may have been influenced by Syria war returnees and IS literature like the magazine *Dabiq*. The magazine featured a rich tribute to Mohamed Muhsin Sharfaz Nilam, one of the first Sri Lankans killed while fighting alongside IS forces in Raqqa, Syria in July 2015 (See [Terrorism Monitor](#), December 2, 2015).

A cursory look at Hashim's online speeches and social media postings suggest that he vehemently supported Sharia laws and Islamist ideals. With an objective of bringing the global jihadist movement to Sri Lanka, Hashim circulated propaganda videos on YouTube and Facebook. Under his leadership, the NTJ organized regular Islamic tutorial and orientation programs and advertised event information (mostly taking place at madrasas) through its social media handles (e.g. Twitter). A deep probe into various advertised programs on social media revealed that his family members were also actively

engaged in conducting these events, especially his brother Zain Hashim ([Aththa Withthi News](#), May 2). Several audio-visual materials were found during an April 26 raid on a Sainthamarudu (Ampara district) hideout. One such video circulated over the internet, which was perhaps recorded in this hideout, featured Zahran Hashim's brothers Zain and Rilwan Hashim, along with their father Hayath Mohamed Hashim, announcing that they are waging a 'holy war' (jihad) ([Daily Mirror](#), May 2). Most of the family members of Zahran Hashim, including his brothers, Zain Hashim and Rilwan Hashim, and father Hayath Hashim, were killed during the raid.

Zahran Hashim often bragged about having received messages and instructions from "Sham" (Syria) before members of his motley group, likely in an attempt to gain new recruits and followers. IS' Amaq News claimed responsibility for the Sainthamarudu events and identified three of their members as Abu Hammad, Abu Sufyan, and Abu al-Qa'qa ([The Morning](#), April 28). On May 5, Sri Lankan police discovered NTJ's sprawling training camp in Olikkulam, located on the outskirts of Kattankudi, the Hashims' hometown ([Daily News](#), May 6).

Along with his anti-Buddhist activities in the country, Hashim openly endorsed and supported Salafi-Wahhabi preachers including India's Zakir Naik. According to Sri Lanka's Terrorist Investigation Division, Hashim received encouragement to follow IS ideals from a local cleric and Syrian war returnee, Mohammed Imaath Fakir. Fakir was reportedly arrested from Dehiwala along with 15 others in connection with the Easter Sunday attacks ([News First](#)

[Colombo], May 1). Most of them have returned from the Syrian war over the last couple of years. If police sources are to be believed, several of these arrestees had undergone training in Turkey. However, another IS and NTJ-linked suspect, Abu Bakkar, a close associate of Hashim, had fled the country following the Easter Sunday attacks ([Daily Mirror](#), May 27). While more information on NTJ and Hashim's extremist network is still emerging, it is still unclear how he connected with JMI members like Mohamed Ibrahim Inshaf and Mohamed Ibrahim Ilham, both brothers with rich family background from Dematagoda, Colombo.

Amid rising religious tensions in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday violence—especially in the town of Negombo, which has recently suffered heavily from clashes between Buddhists and Muslims—the Sri Lankan president banned NTJ and JMI, along with the group Willayath As Seylani (WAS) on May 14, for "the purpose of ensuring the continuance of peace within the country and in the interest of national security, public order, and the rule of law" ([Colombo Page](#), May 14). The investigation is now on to discover if Hashim or his networks had received any logistical support or direct orders from IS' central leadership in Syria, and to establish the level of Islamic State's communications with and control over local Sri Lankan groups or individuals like Hashim.

Despite Indian intelligence agencies warning Sri Lankan security agencies that Hashim and his group were possibly planning terror strikes in Sri Lanka targeting Catholic churches and the Indian Embassy in Colombo, local officials failed to act on the information in early April.

However, with assistance from India's National Investigation Agency (NIA), the Sri Lankan security apparatus must now unravel and contain the spread of Hashim's network within Sri Lanka and beyond.

Animesh Roul is the executive director of the New Delhi-based policy research group [Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict](#). He specializes in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing, and armed conflict and violence in South Asia. Mr. Roul has written extensively on these subject areas, being published in edited books, journals, and policy magazines. He co-authored a book on India's indigenous terror group [Indian Mujahideen](#) (Springer, 2013). He is regularly cited in the [Washington Post](#), [Reuters](#), [Wall Street Journal](#) and [Hindustan Times](#) among others. He regularly contributes to [The Jamestown Foundation's Terrorism Monitor](#) and [Militant Leadership Monitor](#).

Iran's High Value Target in Europe—Habib Jaber al-Ka'abi

Nicholas A. Heras

Over the past year, there has been an increased awareness of, and attention to, the activities of Iran's intelligence services and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to target Iranian dissidents and leaders of diaspora movements that are based in Europe ([The National](#) [Abu Dhabi], May 15; [al-Jazeera](#) [Doha], January 8; [Reuters](#), November 19, 2018). Although this is not a new phenomenon—Iran's intelligence agencies and the IRGC have been targeting dissidents and diaspora leaders in Europe since the 1980s—the renewed focus has been the result of the targeting of individuals such as Habib Jaber al-Ka'abi deep inside Europe ([Christian Science Monitor](#), May 2; [Sky News Arabia](#) [Abu Dhabi], October 31, 2018). A high-value target for Iran's intelligence services, Habib Jaber al-Ka'abi is one of the most important Europe-based Iranian diaspora opposition leaders. He is seeking the separation of Khuzestan Province, which is an oil-rich, ethnic Arab-plurality province that borders Iraq in southwestern Iran ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), November 2, 2018).

Jaber, 49, is the leader of Harakat al-Nidaal al-'Arabi li-Tahrir al-Ahwaz (ASMLA—the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz) an ethnic Arab, Ahwazi organization based in Copenhagen, Denmark, which organizes political rallies in Europe drawing attention to the plight of ethnic Arabs in Khuzestan and

calling for resistance against the Iranian state. ASMLA operates an Arabic-language satellite station, which has networks of operatives present in Khuzestan Province ([YouTube](#), January 2, 2018; [YouTube](#), April 23, 2015). Under Jaber's leadership, ASMLA maintains an armed wing, the Moihuddin al-Nasser Martyrs' Brigade, which is believed to have at least 300 operatives in Khuzestan Province ([YouTube](#), April 23, 2015). [1] Dozens of ASMLA operatives in Khuzestan have reportedly been arrested and executed by Iranian authorities since the formation of the organization ([al-Quds al-Arabi](#), November 8, 2017). A native of the city of Ahwaz, the largest city and capital of Khuzestan Province, Jaber is now a Danish citizen who is a resident in the city of Copenhagen. Prior to immigrating to Denmark in the mid-1990s, Jaber was a teacher and then a principal at several schools in the city of Ahwaz in Khuzestan ([YouTube](#), April 23, 2015).

Under Jaber's leadership, ASMLA helped coordinate and lead widespread protests against the Iranian government in Ahwaz in 2005, which prompted a harsh response from Iran's security services ([YouTube](#), October 11, 2017; [Ahwazna](#), August 10, 2016; [YouTube](#), April 23, 2015). ASMLA has also claimed responsibility for at least four attacks inside of Khuzestan Province since 2005, including against Iranian government buildings and against oil pipelines running through the province ([Ahwazna](#), March 1, 2018; [YouTube](#), October 11, 2017; [YouTube](#), April 23, 2015). These attacks are estimated to have killed at least 17 people and wounded at least 120 others. [2] ASMLA reportedly had role in a September 2018 attack against a military

parade commemorating the Iran-Iraq War in Ahwaz, which killed 29 people, including women and children, and wounded 70 others. A splinter faction of ASMLA initially claimed and then denied responsibility for the attack, and which was simultaneously claimed by Islamic State ([Reuters](#), October 16, 2018; [United Nations](#), September 24, 2018; [al-Araby al-Jadid](#), September 24, 2018; [al-Arabiyya](#) [Dubai], September 22, 2018). In any case, Jaber Tweeted his support for the attack and reiterated that he considered the military parade to be a legitimate target ([Twitter](#), September 22, 2018).

Jaber was one of the two founding leaders of ASMLA, which was established in 1999. Since the formation of ASMLA in 1999, Jaber has become one of the most prominent leaders within the ethnic Arab Ahwaz diaspora, and ASMLA is the most prominent would-be liberation, Ahwazi diaspora organization. Under Jaber's leadership, ASMLA seeks to assert the Arab identity of Khuzestan (Ahwaz), reverse the "Persian-ization" of the population in Ahwaz, convince Arab States that Khuzestan is the essential eastern boundary of the Arab world against Iran, draw attention to human rights abuses and purported ethnic discrimination against the Arabs of Khuzestan, seize control over Khuzestan's oil and return it to Khuzestan's ethnic Arab population, and make Khuzestan one of the key battlegrounds for the Arabs against Iran ([YouTube](#), October 11, 2017; [Asharq al-Awsat](#), March 20, 2016; [YouTube](#), April 23, 2015). In his interviews with the Arabic-language media, Jaber has drawn a purposeful and direct parallel between the ethnic Arab separatist movement in Khuzestan and the

Syrian revolution, emphasizing that both the Ahwazis and the Syrians were being oppressed at the command of Iran ([YouTube](#), December 29, 2015; [YouTube](#), April 23, 2015).

ASMLA is reportedly comprised of both Sunni and Shia members from the Ahwazi diaspora, mostly resident in Europe but also resident in the Gulf Arab countries. [3] There is apparently some controversy that this organization draws its operatives inside Khuzestan from the province's Sunni population, leading to charges within the Ahwazi diaspora that it is a tool of Saudi intelligence to lead a sectarian uprising against the majority Shia (Arab and Persian) population of the province. [4] For his part, Jaber consistently maintains the public position that he and his movement are fighting for all the Arabs in Ahwaz, both Sunni and Shia, and that what it is resisting against is the "Safawi," (i.e. Persian imperialism) that is occupying Khuzestan ([YouTube](#), April 23, 2015).

Jaber became the sole leader of the organization after his predecessor, Ahmad Mola Nissi, was assassinated in November 2017 in front of Nissi's home in The Hague, Netherlands ([Reuters](#), December 12, 2017; [al-Quds Al-Arabi](#), November 8, 2017). The attempt was reportedly carried out by a European criminal network hired by Iran's intelligence services ([The Telegraph](#) [London], January 8). Nissi's assassination highlighted the role of ASMLA in the Ahwaz separatist movement. Jaber was also reportedly targeted for assassination inside Denmark by Iran's intelligence services who tried to use an Iranian with Norwegian nationality to carry out the assassination ([al-Arabiya](#) [Dubai], November 1, 2018; [al-Jazeera](#) [Doha], October

30, 2018). The assassination attempt was foiled by Danish, German, and Swedish security services, and in response, the European Union imposed sanctions on Iran's security services in January 2019 ([Reuters](#), January 8).

The Iranian intelligence services' apparent fixation on Habib Jaber demonstrates the potential influence that he and his organization have within the Ahwazi militant separatist movement. Jaber is unusual among diaspora figures from Iran in that he is open about the goal of his organization to instigate a violent rebellion inside of Iranian territory. Now that he is under the full protection of the Danish security services, it will be more difficult for Iran to attack Jaber. His location deep in Western Europe, his apparent connections to Iran's Gulf Arab opponents, and his organization's relative effectiveness in carrying out operations inside of Ahwaz are also indicators that he is an unusual figure who is playing an important role in the efforts of Iran's opponents to foment an insurgency on Iranian soil.

Nicholas A. Heras is the Middle East Security Fellow at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) and senior analyst for the Jamestown Foundation.

Notes

[1] Author's interviews with Ahwaz native who studies with ethnic Arab, Ahwaz political movements. Interviews conducted in early May 2019.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

Shafi Muhammad Burfat: Advocate for Sindhi Independence from Pakistan

Farhan Zahid

The separatist movement in Pakistan's southern Sindh province is one of South Asia's oldest irredentist movements. Separatist tendencies based on irredentist ideals have surfaced repeatedly in Pakistan's Sindh and Baluchistan provinces. Sindhi nationalism is a blend of irredentism and socialist leanings. The movement has its presence in the urban centers of Sindh province with the exception of two major cities—Karachi and Hyderabad. The two are not Sindhi majority cities and are overwhelmingly populated by the Urdu-speaking immigrant community from India. With a long history of terrorism and political violence, this separatist movement is currently led by Shafi Muhammad Burfat, chairman of the Jeay Sindh Muttahida Mahaz (JSMM), and alleged leader of the Sindhu Desh Liberation Army (SDLA).

History and Background

Sindh was the first province in British India whose provincial assembly voted in favor of joining the nascent Pakistani state in 1947. Immediately after independence, the leader of the ruling Muslim League Sindh Chapter, Ghulam Muhammad Syed, decided to part ways and launch an independence movement. Syed was a nationalist ideologue, but he was never involved in political violence against the state. He remains a father figure to today's Sindhi nationalist-separatist leaders. Syed's Jaye Sindh Tehreek (Long Live Sindh Movement) was used

as a platform for future separatist parties. The Sindh Taraqi Pasand Party (STP) was another major political party/nationalist movement, and was led by its violent and ultra-nationalist leader, Dr. Adbul Qadir Magsi. Magsi was involved in leading violent rioting and massacre of Urdu Speaking community in Hyderabad in 1986. STP had some popular support during the 1980s, but the party splintered into many factions in the late 1990s. Jeay Sindh Muttahida Mahaz (JSMM) was formed in September 2001 after Shafi Burfat developed differences with Dr. Abdul Qadir Magsi and Bashir Khan Qureshi, another important leader. [1]

The Sindhu Desh Liberation Army (SDLA) was established on the pattern of the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), the Baluch nationalist-separatist movement ([Friday Times](#), March 5, 2012) The activities of JSMM have gained momentum in recent years as the SDLA has resorted to armed violence. However, it is apparent that the SDLA lacks popular support among Sindhi people. Still, the JSMM has some level of street power that it displays during protests in the Sindh province's urban centers.

Who is Shafi Burfat?

Shafi Burfat was born as Ghulam Hussain in 1966 in a village in the Jamshoro district of Sindh province. He received his early education from his native village Tehri of the Sehwan Shariff subdivision, later graduating from the University of Sindh law school. Burfat gained his separatist political beliefs from his native village, which is known for nationalist tendencies, joining Jeay Sindh Qaumi Mahaz, another Sindh nationalist party, in 1980. [2]

Currently, Burfat is in self-exile in Germany, from which he sends letters and speeches to party activists, as well as to the UN and other international organizations, regarding atrocities being committed against Sindhi nationalists ([News International](#), November 24, 2018). He also operates his own Twitter account, which he uses to spread his messages to followers and party workers.

Due to his supposed involvement in terrorist activities, the government of Sindh has announced a bounty of money of approximately \$7,000 (or 1 million Pakistani rupees) for his arrest, and his name has been included in the Red Book of Sindh police, a most-wanted list compiled by Pakistani security forces ([News International](#), March 30, 2014).

Aims and objectives of SDLA

The SDLA seeks to attain a separate homeland for Sindhi people, called Sindhu Desh. Towards this goal, the SDLA advocates for armed resistance. Their objectives are:

- To create awareness and a yearning for national liberation among Sindhi people in Pakistan, to bring youth onto a single platform and invigorate them.
- To safeguard the motherland and its resources from the “invasion of China through CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor).”
- To gain global recognition of the importance of the Sindhi nation.
- To prove that the Sindhi nation is able to protect its future.

- To create a sense of responsibility for guarding their freedom through unification, consciousness, and resistance.

- To liberate Sindhu Desh, create national fortifications, and bring prosperity to poor peasants by distributing land free of cost after attaining independence.

- To prove that, like the Palestinian nation, the Sindhi nation can also fight and sacrifice for their homeland.

- To unify under a single platform all youth, peasants, students, conscious sons and daughters who have decided to sacrifice their lives for the cause of their motherland.

- To adopt the thoughts of Syed, resistance of Sorhiya Badshah, and the martyrdom of (former Pakistani Prime Minister) Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto as guidelines for the decisive fight with Punjabis. [3]

Terrorist Activities

The SDLA launched its campaign of terrorist attacks in 2009. In its initial phase, the SDLA under Burfat targeted railway tracks in the Nawabshah, Hyderabad, and Kotri districts of rural Sindh between 2009 and 2010. Later, the campaign expanded to urban centers such as Karach and Sukhar. In one incident, SDLA militants killed seven people and injured 25 in an attack on a passenger bus near Nawabshah district in 2012 ([Pakistan Observer](#), May 26, 2012). In its later phase, the SDLA began targeting Chinese engineers and contractors working in Sindh on CPEC projects. This is perhaps because of the overlapping anti-Chinese agenda of Baloch separatist groups and the

SDLA. Burfat has denied that his organization has links with Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), but he has not commented on the SDLA's established links with the BLA, which is operating in neighboring Baluchistan province. [4] In 2016, SDLA militants severely injured a Chinese engineer and his driver in a bomb attack on their vehicle in the suburb of Karachi ([Geo News](#), May 31, 2016). JSMM, the parent organization of SDLA, had led a procession against CPEC in Badin district and protestors chanted slogans against Pakistan and China's cooperation ([News International](#), November 24, 2018).

The scale of SDLA terrorist activities was revealed to security forces after the Ibrahaim Haidri incident in 2009. Mumtaz Bhutto, the senior vice president of SDLA, was involved in an explosion at his home in Ibrahaim Haidri, a neighborhood of Karachi. The incident resulted in the deaths of Bhutto and another senior leader Zulfiqar Kolachi ([Express Tribune](#), May 23, 2012). It was later found that those individuals were making bombs with the aim of destroying railway tracks and gas pipelines in Sindh province. Mumtaz's brother, Muzaffar Bhutto, another senior leader of SDLA, later went missing. His bullet-riddled body was found on a national highway near Karachi. His family suspected that he was killed by security personnel who had picked him up a year and a half earlier from Karachi ([Dawn](#), May 23, 2012). From 2011 to 2014, the bodies of 20 Sindhi nationalist-separatist leaders, all killed by gunshots, have been found in different parts of Sindh ([News International](#), March 23, 2014).

According to Pakistani intelligence sources, Burfat plans to continue targeting Chinese interests in Pakistan related to CPEC projects. This includes bombing rail track and gas fields in Sindh province, the National Bank of Pakistan, and other government properties. Burfat is also targeting Punjabi settlers in Sindh, and outside laborers (from other provinces, such as Pashtun workers) working in Sindh province. Sources also informed the *Militant Leadership Monitor* that it would be difficult for the SDLA to target Chinese citizens in Pakistan because of the extra security measures taken by Sindh police. Information about local SDLA commanders is very limited because the organization operates secretly and does not allow much room for collecting information about its local leaders. It appears that SDLA militants may in the near future attempt to target buses carrying passengers and conduct bomb attacks in areas frequented by Chinese people. [5]

Areas of Burfat's Influence, Activities, and Links

Though Burfat operates from abroad, his organization is active in many districts of Sindh and continues recruiting young Sindhi people. Hyderabad, Larkana, Sukhar, Khairpur, Shikarpur, Nawabshah, Jacobabad, and rural areas such as Steel Town in Karachi are among the most active areas of recruitment. The SDLA also holds some influence in Steel Town and the Ittehad Town areas in the suburbs of Karachi. Recently, the Karachi suburbs have become the center of the group's activities, due to the many sympathizers and militants who have now settled in Sindhi speaking localities on the periphery of the city. These areas include Gadap Town,

Gulshan-e-Hadeed, Site, Chanesar Goth, Ibrahim Hyderi, and Gulistan-e-Johar.

Burfat maintains close links with Baluch nationalist-separatist groups, and SDLA militants are reportedly receiving training at BLA terrorist training camps. Reportedly, SDLA activists obtained training from the BLA in the area of Khuzdar and Dera Bugti. According to one security official, during a military operation against the BLA, 12 people were arrested, six of whom were SDLA trainees. According to the same source, the group is armed with AK-47s, grenades, rocket launchers, IEDs, petrol bombs, anti-tank mines, PK machines guns, Chinese and locally-made pistols, and large quantities of explosives such as Semtex and C4. The Pakistani government has accused Indian and Afghan intelligence agencies of arming separatists in the country. [6]

Conclusion

Although Burfat is in exile, he still exercises control over local commanders and the group's operations. SDLA activities are currently focused on targeting Chinese workers and engineers working on CPEC projects in Sindh. The SDLA has not become a large-scale terrorist organization like the TTP or BLA, but it appears that the group is spreading its influence across the Sindh province and even in Sindhi minority urban centers like Karachi. The group will continue to grow due to Sindh nationalists' hostility to CPEC projects, which will cause further instability in Pakistan. Even though the SDLA currently appears less threatening, it has the potential to grow into a larger threat, leaving policymakers with a serious problem.

Farhan Zahid has done his Ph.D. in Counter Terrorism (Topic: Al-Qaeda-linked Islamist violent Non-State Actors in Pakistan and their relationship with Islamist Parties) from Vrije University Brussels, Belgium. He writes on counter-terrorism, al-Qaeda, Pakistani al-Qaeda-linked groups, Islamist violent non-state actors in Pakistan, militant landscapes in Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban.

Notes

[1] Telephone Interview with Zia ur Rehman, a Karachi-based senior journalist on April 20, 2019.

[2] Discussions with a senior police officer of Sindh province on April 28, 2019.

[3] From an SDLA pamphlet.

[4] Discussions with a senior police officer of Sindh police.

[5] Discussions with an Intelligence Bureau officer in Sindh province.

[6] Discussions with a senior official of a security organization

The Death of Wilayat Sinai Spokesman Osama al-Masri and its Impact on the Insurgency in Sinai

Muhammad Mansour

The Egyptian military dealt a serious blow to the Islamic State's (IS) Egyptian province, Wilayat (province) Sinai, when an airstrike killed influential spokesman Muhammad Ahmad Ali al-Islawi, a.k.a Abu Osama al-Masri, last year. Al-Masri's death was confirmed on November 5, 2018, when the North Sinai-based IS wilayat released a promotional video titled "The Path of Rationality From Darkness to Light," mentioning his name followed by the expression, "May God accept him." The statement confirmed news of al-Masri's death a few months earlier ([Mada Masr](#), November 17, 2018).

Reports indicated that al-Masri was between 37 and 40 years old when he died. He was not only an influential member and a spokesman of Wilayat Sinai; he was also responsible for the deadliest attack in Egypt's modern history. In October 2015, he masterminded the downing of a Russian jet, which killed all its 224 passengers and crew shortly after its takeoff from Sharm el-Sheikh airport ([al-Arabiya](#), November 8, 2015).

"We are the ones who downed it by the grace of Allah, and we are not compelled to announce the method that brought it down," al-Masri said in a statement. The success of the attack, which came on the first anniversary of his allegiance to IS, was a "blessing of our gathering under a

single banner and leader," he said, referring to the group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ([al-Youm al-Sabae](#), May, 18, 2015).

Al-Masri's role in downing the Russian jet came to light even before his statement, when British intelligence confirmed through leaked phone calls among IS militants that he had planted an explosive charge in a luggage of a passenger jet with the assistance of a civil servant at Sharm el-Sheikh's airport. As a result, Russian and British governments suspended their flights to Egypt. At that time, British officials expressed their readiness to dispatch a team of British Special Forces to Sinai to target al-Masri ([Tahrir News](#), November 8, 2015).

After the military announced a large-scale "Comprehensive Military Operation," which aimed to eliminate the country's growing insurgency, it was likely that Egypt's security apparatus heaved a sigh of relief when Wilayat Sinai confirmed al-Masri's death from a military airstrike in June 2018. Indeed, al-Masri's death has crippled the group's terror activities, which had gained momentum after the Egyptian military, backed by popular protests, overthrew Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated president Muhammad Mursi in mid-2013 ([Sada el-Balad](#), November 17, 2018).

Al-Masri was born into a reputable tribe and grew up in North Sinai Governorate. Other reports indicate that he was born in the Sharqia Governorate, located in the northern part of Egypt, and later moved with his family to Sinai.

Prior to the Egyptian uprising that led to the ouster of Mubarak in 2011, al-Masri had adopted an ultraconservative ideology of Islam

as reflected in his extremist views, excommunicating and threatening the Egyptian state. Before joining Wilayat Sinai, he made a living as a Quran therapist, meaning he attempted to cure patients through the recitation of related verses from the Quran.

Other reports claim that al-Masri's real name is Yossry Abdul Moneim Nofal, a former leader of the organization al-Najun Min al-Nar that appeared in the 1980s. The organization was similar in its tactics and ideology to the group Egyptian Islamic Jihad led by Ayman al-Zawahiri. Most members of al-Najun Min al-Nar were in their 20s. Nofal escaped from prison, along with most of the organization's members who were in jail, benefiting from the security vacuum that accompanied the Egyptian uprising in 2011 ([al-Jouf News](#), November 9, 2015).

In the aftermath of the uprising, al-Masri became the spokesman for Ansar Bait al-Maqdis (ABM), succeeding Abu Hamam, a.k.a Abu Doaa al-Ansry, who was killed in one of the military's airstrikes against the group. Experts claim that al-Masri spent a year in Syria, where he received training in militant tactics, and was groomed to be one of IS' leaders in Sinai. Al-Masri was the person who read the November 2014 rebranding statement, in which ABM announced allegiance to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, becoming Wilayat Sinai ([Mobtada](#), June 26, 2018).

Al-Masri appeared in several videos claiming Wilayat Sinai's responsibility for large-scale attacks that killed dozens of military personnel, including an attack against military personnel in

Sinai in October 2014, which left 33 soldiers dead. Wilayat Sinai showed a graphic propaganda video claiming responsibility and showing the execution of two simultaneous attacks ([Masr al-Arabia](#), October 25, 2014).

According to some reports, al-Masri embraced extremist views and received militant training in Gaza and Syria. Some sources said he used to move back and forth from Egypt to Gaza, making use of underground tunnels on the borders between both countries ([Al-Arabiya](#), November 8, 2015). Other reports indicated that he used to appear blindfolded and was only recognizable in two videos he made, given he has vitiligo signs that mark his hands. ([Tahrir News](#), November 8, 2015).

Al-Masri was IS' main negotiator with the Bedouins of Sinai, given his negotiation skills and strong ties with tribes there. To that end, the leadership of the group assigned him to get closer to the tribes and tasked him to appeal and recruit young Bedouins, especially those who are frustrated with the military's counterterrorism campaign ([Aman](#), December 11, 2017).

In May 2015, al-Masri reportedly appeared in an audio statement posted on a prominent jihadist website, calling for attacks against Egyptian judges, after the group killed three judges in North Sinai, saying: "It is wrong for the tyrants to jail our brothers," referring to judges. "Poison their food... surveil them at home and in the street... destroy their homes with explosives if you can" ([al-Hurra](#), May 21, 2015).

The same year, al-Masri released a video showing the beheading of ten Bedouins, accusing them of being informants or spies for

the Egyptian military. The video also showed IS executioners beheading four others for supposedly passing information to Israeli spies to assist in drone strikes ([al-Arabiya](#) February, 11 2015).

Maher Farghaly, an expert in militant organizations, said al-Masri is dubbed “The Mayor of IS” and released several threatening and provocative videos against the Egyptian military and police. One of his recordings called for Muslims to kill judges, which came shortly after IS killed three judges in Sinai in May 2015 at the peak of attacks against the Egyptian state ([Mobtadaa](#), June 26, 2018).

As the military succeeded in targeting Wilayat Sinai’s high profile leaders, several lower-ranking members have become disaffected by IS’ failure to achieve any tangible progress in its war with the Egyptian state. Their complaints have led to their excommunication from the group. Jamaat Jund al-Islam, an al-Qaeda affiliate also known as Jama'ah Ansar al-Islam, released a video that included confessions from an IS dissident, who claimed that Wilayat Sinai was responsible for the al-Rawda mosque massacre that left 235 people dead during Friday prayers in 2017 ([Al-Arabiya](#), November 12, 2017).

The dissident spoke on the growing hostility between al-Baghdadi’s organization and Hamas in Gaza, saying that one source of tension stems from the presence of several foreign fighters within IS. The dissident also pointed to Hamas’ accusation of IS members displaying moral debauchery.

The rising dissident in Wilayat Sinai was apparent when the group’s jurisprudence judge

sentenced one of the group’s members to death, saying: “Today we will execute one of the apostates for smuggling weapons to Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades from Arish to Gaza Sector.” The Wilayat Sinai executioner was identified as the son of a prominent Hamas leader ([Al-Masryoon](#), January 4, 2018).

Conclusion

Wilayat Sinai and other IS offshoots across the region are diminishing, disempowered, and undergoing a dismantling process, due to two factors.

The first factor is Egypt’s relentless and continued crackdown on militant strongholds and leading members, taking into consideration the potential emergence of mutated types of Islamist militants within the rugged and thinly populated northern Sinai. Still, targeting Wilayat Sinai’s influential leaders such as al-Masri has indeed broken the morale of the most powerful militant groups, whose regional structure is shaken up by the coordinated efforts of countries across the region. The military is increasing control over the country’s borders and drying up the financial and logistical resources that maintain the militants’ power.

Second, Wilayat Sinai’s strategy after the military’s wide-ranging counter-terror campaign is itself eroding the structure the group was built on. For instance, Wilayat Sinai has been engaged in clashes with tribes in Sinai as well as other militant groups. In addition, after targeting military checkpoints and vehicles frequently for almost two years, the group, as of 2015, has been targeting civilians such as Coptic Christians at their churches or monasteries, as well as Muslims

during their prayers. This reflects the weakness and fragility of the group's structure and leadership, given that such attacks are little more than an attempt to show that Wilayat Sinai still exists.

Last but not least, the rising dissent within the ranks of Wilayat Sinai has hollowed out the group from militant recruits. This has made it even easier for the military and police to target its influential members, who laid the foundation of militant activity and strategy, especially after the security vacuum that came in the aftermath of the Egyptian uprising in 2011.

For all the above-mentioned reasons, one can argue that al-Masri's death has degraded Wilayat Sinai and made it voiceless, and thus badly affected its message and recruiting process.

Muhammad Mansour is a highly accomplished investigative journalist with more than ten-year, solid track record of producing high-quality print and online reports for international media outlets, including The Washington Post, The Guardian, The Times and Egypt Independent. He covers a broad range of topics related to Egyptian politics and global affairs. Mansour examines the junctions of Egyptian politics and society as they slowly disintegrate under the pressure of a ruthless military dictatorship. He gave lectures on new media and the Arab Spring in the Czech Republic and India. Mansour is currently a fellow at the Leaders for Democracy program at Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University in New York.

Libya's Rising Star: A Profile of Misratan Leader Fathi Bashagha

Dario Cristiani

Since the outbreak of the Libyan revolution in 2011, the city of Misrata has assumed a central role in shaping the country's revolutionary and post-revolutionary dynamics. Home to some of Libya's most potent militias and a dynamic economic and trade center, groups from the city can mobilize up to 18,000 fighters. That said, as Libya lost momentum in consolidating its "nascent democracy" following the first elections in July 2012 and the ensuing descent into chaos, the city started dividing along political and strategic lines. Some of these groups are considered radical Islamists, linked to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) or other global organizations, and indeed some Misratan groups belong to this universe. However, Misrata's militias, supported by American airpower, also played an essential role in fighting the Islamic State (IS) in Sirte. One of the Misratan officers who acted as a liaison with the Americans is the current Minister of the Interior of the Government of the National Accord (GNA)—and since April, also Minister of the Defense—Fathi Bashagha. Bashagha's role in Libyan political dynamics is becoming more and more central.

Bashagha's Rise

Fathi Ali Abdulsalam Bashagha was born in Misrata on August 20, 1962. He graduated from the Air College in Misrata in 1984, receiving a degree in aviation sciences and was a specialized

fighter pilot, after receiving his training certificate in 1985. He remained in the army for eight years, before resigning in 1993. He later became a businessman, founding a trading company, very much in line with the historical characterization of Misrata as a merchant city ([Al Wasat](#), October 9, 2018).

Following the eruption of the Libyan revolution in 2011, Bashagha soon became one of the most crucial leaders of Misrata. He was part of its Military Committee, and one of the liaison officers with Western forces during the Qadhafi regime's siege of Misrata. In 2012, he became part of Misrata's Shura council, and the following year his name emerged as potential Minister of Defense ([Afrigate News](#), October 7, 2018). In 2014, he was elected as a member of the House of Representatives (HoR). As the HoR moved to Tobruk in September 2014, he promoted a boycott of its activities and was one of the major supporters of Fajr Libya (Dawn Libya) and the National Salvation Government led by Khalifa Ghwell.

However, unlike other Misratan players, Bashagha has never been a radical and has often adopted pragmatic positions, displaying a willingness to negotiate with enemies, a rare trait in Libya. Since the inception of the Shirak process, he was considered one of the Misratans working harder to bridge the gap between the Libyan factions ([La Repubblica](#), January 8, 2016). At the time of the negotiations to establish the GNA, his name emerged as a potential National Security Advisor, a position that the then-UN special envoy Bernardino Leon indeed offered to him, but Bashagha refused ([The Arab Weekly](#), October 14, 2018).

Bashagha was appointed Minister of the Interior in October 2018, replacing Abdulsalam Achour. Sarraj nominated Bashagha in an attempt to broaden his support nationwide, rallying Misratans behind him. Bashagha's appointment was also an attempt by Sarraj to loosen the grasp of militias on Tripoli and launch a wide-reaching process of security reform, following a summer of clashes and growing volatility ([Middle East Eye](#), October 7, 2018). This past April, Sarraj also appointed him Minister of Defense ([Erem News](#), April 14). He took over this position from Sarraj, who held the position for a few months following the ousting of Mahdi Baghathi ([The Libya Observer](#), July 29, 2018).

The broadening of his political and security responsibilities displays his increasing centrality, not only in the GNA, but also for Libya's entire political landscape. During his first months as Minister of the Interior, he worked to reduce the fragmentation of the security landscape—particularly in Tripoli. In this pursuit, he launched an attempt to unify the security structures of the Interior Ministry, reaching out to his counterpart in the east of Libya ([Al Wasat](#), January 2, 2019).

Bashagha Between Tripoli's Militias and the Haftar Offensive

The first, and major, task that Bashagha had was to undermine the influence that Tripoli militias had over the capital and the GNA. Bashagha was indeed appointed in October 2018, after the end of the conflict a number of militias in Tripoli had with the Tarhouna Brigade (the 7th Brigade) and the forces of Salah Badi (see [MLM](#) October 4, 2018). In January 2019, Bashagha openly said

that “armed groups and forces, registered under Libya’s interior ministry, are dominating the decision-making process in political and economic fields” ([Al-Sharq Al-Wasat](#), January 6).

His attempt to reorganize the security structures of Libya—indeed, he has put a significant amount of resources into rebuilding the police forces so far—immediately put him on a collision course with a number of Tripoli’s militia leaders. In January, Bashagha’s decision to hand control of the destroyed Tripoli International Airport over to the Tarhouna brigade reportedly provoked a reaction from the militias of the Tripoli Protection Forces (TPF). The TPF was established at the end of 2018, with a number of Tripoli militias unified under this umbrella structure. One of the goals of this reorganization was to bring them to work more closely with the Bashagha and the GNA. Several statements posted on social media allegedly suggested that several of these militias were growing vocal against Bashagha and Sarraj, accusing them of supporting the Tarhouna brigade and pushing Tripoli to the brink of another war. As a result, the militias said they would no longer obey instructions from the GNA ([The Arab Weekly](#), January 20). A few days later, forces linked to the TPF denounced these statements, claiming that these were false and did not represent the vision of the militias, who were instead keen to cooperate with Bashagha. In the wake of Haftar’s rise in the south, and the two waves of clashes among militias in Tripoli, the situation within a number of these militias became increasingly unstable. Second- and third-tier leaders were trying to gain influence, and factions within these militias were becoming

more and more vocal against each other. These statements are often posted on social media channels where several people who have access can post. Also, militias often have several social media pages run by different people within the same militia. As such, these anti-Bashagha and anti-GNA statements were likely signals that many of these militias held different and conflicting internal views on whether, and how, to work with the GNA Interior Ministry.

Against this backdrop, Haftar’s offensive in western Libya also brought the militias of Tripoli closer to the GNA. Many of them were, and remain, wary of many Misratan players, but Haftar’s advancement in the west—a development they perceive as an existential threat—pushed many of these groups to work together tactically. Misrata, despite its significant internal divisions, has had a substantial history of opposition to Haftar over the past years. Bashagha is no exception, although in the past he has expressed a willingness to negotiate with the general.

In January, as Haftar launched his military operation in the south, Bashagha welcomed the fact that the general’s operation dismantled the networks of external actors operating in the Libyan Fezzan region—regional jihadists, Chadian rebels, etc.—saying that the action was acceptable from the point of view of the national interest. Bashagha also expressed the wish that Haftar’s role in the south would be constructive and not oriented towards widening the divisions between Libyans and between the east and the west. Bashagha warned of serious repercussions if Haftar used his increasing territorial control to launch a new military

offensive ([Al-Hurra TV](#), February 15). In March, following the UN-backed negotiation between Sarraj and Haftar in Abu Dhabi concerning the establishment of a new Tripoli-based government, reports emerged that the agreement let Bashagha remain as Minister of the Interior as the sole Misratan of the new arrangement ([Orient XXI](#), April 26). However, the military offensive in early April ended the possibility of convergence, and the Misratan leader made clear several times that Haftar would have no role in the future of Libya ([The Libya Observer](#), April 27).

International Friends and Foes

His network of international alliances is also very much consistent with the cleavages that have characterized the Libyan political landscape over the past few years. Like many Misratan players—for instance, Salah Badi—Bashagha is considered very close to Turkey (see [MLM](#), February 4). After his appointment, he said openly that the GNA had to immediately activate the security agreements that were in the works with Turkey, stressing the need to implement a joint plan of action and supporting the formation of joint Libyan-Turkish security committees ([Al-Ayam](#), December 24, 2018; [Al Wasat](#), November 5; [Arabi 21](#), December 19). Following the recent launch of Haftar’s military offensive in the west of Libya, Bashagha at the end of April went to Turkey, heading a high-level security delegation that included the commander of the Western Military Region, Osama Al-Juwali, commander of the Tripoli Military Zone, Abdul Basset Marwan, and the head of the State Council, Khaled al-Mishri, emphasizing the need to enhance security cooperation with

Ankara (see [TM](#), April 5; [The Libya Observer](#), April 30).

He has always been particularly active internationally. He has struck several deals with European countries—Italy, the UK, and Germany, for instance—to deepen cooperation in the field of security ([218 Tv](#), December 13, 2018). He also held several meetings with the Italian ambassador and other actors from Rome to reinforce cooperation, consistent with the fact that Italy remains the European country closer to Sarraj and the GNA, despite Rome’s recent rapprochement with Haftar ([ADN Kronos](#), January 29).

Among European countries, Bashagha has a somewhat strained relationship with France, and the outbreak of the conflict in Libya has contributed to further deterioration of bilateral relations between the GNA and Paris. In the early days of his tenure as Minister of the Interior, cooperation with France was instead considered productive ([Anadolu Agency](#), October 23, 2018).

Bashagha called for an end to all forms of cooperation with France, particularly in the area of security, in what was the first GNA’s first direct accusation that France was supporting Haftar and his offensive against Tripoli ([Al Marsad](#), April 18; [The North Africa Post](#), April 19). A few days later, Bashagha reiterated his criticisms, urging Paris to “stand with the democratic norms it believes in” ([The Libya Observer](#), April 28). The ongoing conflict also strained Bashagha’s relations with the regional powers—the UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia—that have supported Haftar. Bashagha said Haftar attacked

after receiving a green light from an Arab country, and the GNA has evidence that foreign aircraft belonging to two Arab states have been involved in the attack on Tripoli ([Al-Hurra TV](#), April 4, 2019). Interestingly enough, while Bashagha has been very vocal against France and regional countries for supporting Haftar, he never made any reference to Russia—another country that has shown a significant degree of convergence with Haftar but which has managed to also maintain good relations with the GNA and Misratan groups.

Conclusions

Bashagha took over the position of Minister of Interior at a tough time for Libya and the GNA. Despite the problems and against all odds, he managed to increase his political centrality. The growing number of responsibilities he is currently handling proves it. Although he has shown a significant commitment to the interests of his hometown, Misrata, he, unlike other leaders from this city, has also displayed a considerable degree of tactical flexibility, showing a significant willingness to negotiate, even with very distant enemies. From this point of view, he may be one of the very few leaders in Libya whose view is not limited to parochial and narrower interests but is broader and somehow truly national.

The same can be said for his international approach—particularly during his first months as Interior Minister, when he tried to strike deals and deepen relations with many different countries, independently of their specific positions on Libya and their relationships with Libyan players. That being said, the eruption of

the conflict in April inevitably led Bashagha to sever ties with a number of countries perceived as closer to Haftar, also ending the possibility of a negotiated settlement with the Tobruk-based general.

Dario Cristiani is a political risk consultant working on Mediterranean countries and a Visiting Fellow at the International Centre for Policing and Security at the University of South Wales (UK). Previously, he was the director of the Executive Training in “Global Risk Analysis and Crisis Management” and an adjunct professor in International Affairs & Conflict Studies at Vesalius College (VUB) in Brussels. He received his PhD in Middle East & Mediterranean Studies from King’s College, University of London, in 2015.

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