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ZACHARY ABUZA

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Zakir Musa's Death and its Impact on al-Qaeda's Ambitions in Indian Kashmir

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Zakir Rashid Bhat, a.k.a. Zakir Musa, the emir of the al-Qaeda-linked group Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH), was killed in an encounter with Indian security forces on May 23 in the Tral area of the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir ([India Today](#), May 10). Arguably the most wanted Islamist terrorist in India, Musa's killing is a boost for the recently re-elected government led by the right-wing Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). His killing coincided with the election victory of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Zakir Musa came into public eye after he parted ways with Hizb-ul-Mujahedeen (HuM) and pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri and roundly denounced Pakistani, Indian, and local Kashmiri leaders. He represented a new generation of Islamist Kashmiri militants who opted to embrace the global jihadist movement rather than restricting their goal to independence from India.

Zakir Musa remained part of HuM and served as its deputy emir but moved on to establish his own militant group, AGH, and establish links with al-Qaeda. He decided to leave HuM after the killing of Burhan Wani, the group's notorious and ruthless commander, in 2016. Musa was the foremost choice to replace Wani. Instead he left HuM to found AGH and declared the ambition to establish an Islamic Caliphate in Kashmir. He denounced both the Pakistani government and the Huraiyat Conference (political wing of Indian pro-independence parties) in Indian Kashmir.

Implications

The death of Zakir Musa is definitely a setback for al-Qaeda. With the emergence of AGH, al-Qaeda Central made an opening into Indian Kashmir's Islamist militancy. This follows the recent expansion of al-Qaeda into other parts of South Asia. Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) is currently working alongside the Afghan Taliban, and Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia Pakistan is operating in the country for which it is named. The advent of AGH in India was an opportunity for al-Qaeda Central; however, the killing of Zakir Musa is a

severe blow to al-Qaeda's ambitions in Indian Kashmir. AQIS's official spokesperson Usama Mehmood has also released an obituary for Zakir Musa by eulogizing his efforts to promote al-Qaeda's vision. Mahmood termed Musa a bright star of jihad in Kashmir and compared his legacy to other fallen Islamist terrorists such as Burhan Wani, Mullah Muhammad Omar, Osama bin Laden, and others ([The Hindu](#), June 7).

But all is not lost for al-Qaeda. AGH's spokesperson Abu Ubaida announced Abdul Hameed Lelhari, a.k.a. Haroon Abbas, as Musa's successor as AGH emir and Ghazi Ibrahim as deputy emir. The new head of AGH is a seasoned jihadist operating in Indian Kashmir and one of the ten founding members of AGH. Of those ten, eight have been killed by Indian security forces during last two years ([Times Now](#), May 28). He, alongside Musa, parted ways with HuM and joined AGH in July 2017 ([India TV News](#), June 6). Lelhari hails from the Pulwama district of Indian Kashmir ([New Delhi Times](#), June 7). Not much is known about Lelhari except that he previously served as deputy emir of AGH under Zakir Musa ([Rising Kashmir](#), June 7). In his maiden audio message released by AGH's al-Hurr Media on July 6, titled *The Solid Structure*, Lelhari vowed to continue the movement, accusing Pakistan of interfering in Kashmir, and calling for an independent Shura council of mujahedeen groups. He further elucidated his main objectives such as establishing Sharia law and allowing military operations in Indian Kashmir to be decided by local commanders. He repeated the oft-used slogan of AGH, i.e. Sharia or martyrdom. ([Economic Times](#), June 7; [Eye on Extremism](#), July 9). With plans like "Solid Structure" and "independent Shura council," the new emir appears to be resurrecting AGH and perhaps has the advantage of capitalizing on the fertile jihadist landscape in Indian Kashmir.

Indian Kashmir is currently under direct President's rule, under which the central government in New Delhi takes direct control of a state during a period of instability, after six months of Governor's rule ([Economic Times](#), December 20, 2018). An aggrieved and disgruntled Kashmiri populace living under a perpetually hazardous security situation is vulnerable and easy prey for recruitment by Islamist terrorist organizations. The killing of AGH Emir Zakir Musa may have bolstered the morale of Indian security forces, but growing Islamist radicalization and dissatisfaction among Kashmiri youth is indicative of the fact that the al-Qaeda-linked group may manage to restart its terrorist activities under its new emir. The display of Islamic State and al-Qaeda flags during demonstrations in Indian Kashmir showcased the current Islamist trends. The terrorist group has the advantage of being affiliated with and receiving support from al-Qaeda, a global Islamist terrorist group. The Indian government now needs to reinvigorate counter-violent extremist measures in view of the radical jihadist narratives being disseminated in the region.

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General Ali Kanna: The GNA's Last and Best Hope in Southern Libya

Nicholas A. Heras

Libyan National Army (LNA) forces loyal to the House of Representatives (HoR) government under the command of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar have been waging a concerted campaign to seize, hold, and control the oil resource-rich Fezzan province in Libya's south-central region in order to prevent the United Nations-backed, Government of National Accord (GNA) from entering the province ([al-Araby al-Jadid](#), July 17; [al-Quds al-Arabi](#), June 13; [al-Ghad](#), March 7). The LNA campaign—ongoing since February—intends to bring the major trans-Sahara entry and transit point for sub-Saharan migrants under the control of the HoR government. The route is used by migrants seeking to enter Europe via the Mediterranean traveling from Libya. By controlling Fezzan province, Haftar hopes to further legitimize his forces by establishing dominance over strategic energy resources that are being exploited by European countries and to hold power over the transit routes for African mass migration toward Europe that is of great concern to European countries ([al-Araby al-Jadid](#), July 17; [al-Quds al-Arabi](#), June 13; [Libya Akhbar](#) [Tripoli], January 25). The GNA has sought to counter Haftar by installing one of his former colleagues, General Ali Muhammad Sulayman Kanna, one of the most powerful leaders from Fezzan, as the commander of its forces in the strategic southern Libyan region ([al-Jazeera](#) [Doha], February 7; [al-Araby al-Jadid](#), February 6).

General Kanna is one of Libya's most prominent professional soldiers, and he was a leading officer in the former Gadhafi regime who remained loyal to Muammar Gadhafi throughout the Libyan civil war that began in 2011 ([La Voix de](#)

[la Libye](#) [Ubari], August 20, 2016; [Liberation](#) [Paris], January 15, 2014). A long-time powerbroker in Fezzan province, Kanna, 74, is an ethnic Tuareg leader who is a native of the village of Tigrawatayn, which is an important market town for trans-Saharan traffic moving through the district of Murzuq. This district is near the important and strategic city of Ubari, one of the major settlements in Fezzan province ([Libya Akhbar](#) [Tripoli], January 25). He is a member of the Imamghassatan tribe, an important subgroup within the Tuaregs that have established a tribal network across the trans-Sahara region in states including Libya, Mali, Niger, and Algeria. Kanna's membership in the Imamghassatan tribe is a key reason why he has a great degree of prominence in Fezzan. This branch of the Tuaregs has built a reputation for being committed fighters with the ability to draw strength from a network that exists beyond Libya's borders ([al-Jazeera](#) [Doha], June 22, 2015; [Dar Al-Akhbar](#) [Ubari], February 14, 2013).

Kanna was one of the most important Libyan army officers to support Gadhafi during the 1969 revolution against the monarchy that was then in power in Libya, and he was committed to the so-called "Green Revolution" that Gadhafi promoted in the aftermath of the military coup ([Libya Akhbar](#) [Tripoli], February 5). During the Gadhafi era, Kanna served in a number of senior command positions in the Libyan army, including in artillery, special forces, and in overseeing Libya's border security in the vast, Sahara Desert region that is the prominent feature of Fezzan province ([Libya Akhbar](#) [Tripoli], February 5; [Libya Akhbar](#) [Tripoli], January 25). In particular, during the 1980s, Kanna participated in the Libyan-Chadian conflict that occurred throughout the desert border regions between Libya and Chad ([Libya Akhbar](#) [Tripoli], February 5; [Libya Akhbar](#) [Tripoli], January 25). During the Libyan-Chadian war, Kanna was charged with

mobilizing ethnic Tuareg support across the trans-Saharan region on behalf of Libya ([Small Arms Survey](#), February 1, 2014).

Kanna was made the commander of the “Sabha Military Zone,” which is based in the major Fezzan city of Sabha, as a result of his origins in the province, his leading role in the security state that supported Gadhafi, and his past participation in the conflict against Chad. Kanna, as the chief officer overseeing the Sabha Military Zone, was responsible for the security of all of southern Libya. This region included the border areas with Niger, Chad, Sudan, Algeria, and Egypt, which is both vast in size and dominated by the Sahara Desert ([African Commission on Human Rights and Peoples](#), November 29, 2006). He built his reputation on being an effective commander in desert environments and for conducting warfare in the Sahara against highly mobile opponents. To belie this reputation, Kanna was personally responsible for one of the most elite forces within the Gadhafi-era Libyan military, the Mughawir Brigade, which was responsible for being the rapid reaction force that was used to patrol Libya’s trans-Saharan region. Under Kanna’s leadership, the Mughawir Brigade engaged in limited combat against anti-Gadhafi, revolutionary forces in Fezzan during the 2011 Libyan civil war ([Small Arms Survey](#), February 1, 2014). When the Gadhafi government began to collapse in September 2011, Kanna and fourteen other military commanders who remained loyal to Gadhafi during the civil war left Libya and sought asylum in Niger ([La Voix de la Libye](#) [Ubari], August 20, 2016; [Liberation](#) [Paris], January 15, 2014).

While in exile in Niger, Kanna was continually linked to rumors that he was working with other regime loyalists to bring about the return of the Gaddafi-era government, utilizing the local network he built while commander of the southern region of Libya and through his

position as a notable member of the Tuareg community ([Liberation](#) [Paris], January 15, 2014). Also while in Niger, Kanna was an outspoken supporter of Fezzan province becoming a federal region (currently the province is split among several smaller districts), which would allow Fezzan to maintain control over the exploitation of its significant oil resources ([YouTube](#), May 18; [YouTube](#), February 14, 2013). However, Kanna was also an outspoken advocate for the unit of the local forces in Fezzan—regardless of the ethnic origin of those forces—and it was this effort that put him on the radar of international actors involved in Libya, such as Italy ([Paris Match](#) [Ubari], May 23, 2016).

Despite his past political activism on behalf of Fezzan, Kanna is also an outspoken proponent of the continued unity of Libya’s provinces, and the need for a unified command and control structure for the Libyan security forces under a single, central government ([Libya Akhbar](#) [Tripoli], January 25; [al-Wasat](#) [Tripoli], October 6, 2016). Kanna was not generally linked to the GNA until his appointment by that faction, and was considered a relatively neutral actor in the GNA-versus-HoR conflict, having maintained an independent military command that was charged with Libya’s border security in Fezzan province ([Libya Akhbar](#) [Tripoli], January 25; [Ewan Libya](#) [Tripoli], January 18; [al-Wasat](#) [Tripoli], May 24, 2017). Kanna was in fact considered to be a “Gadhafist” who was more comfortable working with Haftar than with any other prominent, Libyan commander ([Libya Akhbar](#) [Tripoli], January 25; [Al-Araby Al-Jadid](#) [Tripoli], May 20, 2016; [Africa Gate News](#) [Sirte], May 6, 2016). The GNA reportedly sought out Kanna because of his well-established understanding of the socio-politics in Fezzan province, its trans-Saharan networks that cross borders, all of which is an area where the GNA is in a weaker position than the LNA ([al-Araby al-Jadid](#), October 23, 2018).

The GNA is making a big bet that Kanna has enough of a forceful presence in Fezzan that he will be able to build a base of support for the Tripoli-based government in this strategic region. Kanna may be required to act against his stated inclination to reduce ethnic tensions in Fezzan, and instead attempt to activate his network of Tuareg fighters to support GNA efforts against Haftar's forces, which could significantly reduce his national stature. The GNA needs Kanna because it requires the continued support of international actors, such as Italy, who are growing skeptical that the Tripoli-based government can stem the flow of illicit goods, migrants, and trans-national jihadists across the Sahara through Libya into Europe. Kanna, as the most prominent military leader from Fezzan, and an important Tuareg commander with ties throughout the Sahara, seems to be the last, best hope for the GNA to maintain its relevancy in southern Libya, and therefore to European nations.

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Mushtaq Ahmed Zargar: Provocateur of Kashmir's Enduring Terrorist Movement

Animesh Roul

On June 12, motorcycle-borne militants in Jammu and Kashmir's Anantnag district killed five Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel. Kashmir-based Al-Umar-Mujahideen (AuM), a largely inactive terrorist group, has claimed responsibility for the attack ([Daily Excelsior](#), June 13). These fatal shootings and grenade attacks targeting Indian paramilitary forces occurred nearly four months after the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) terrorist group's audacious vehicle-borne suicide attack in Pulwama on February 14, which killed 40 CRPF personnel.

Evidently, JeM and AuM are operating jointly in the restive Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir in order to raise the level of violence by targeting Indian security forces. With the Anantnag shootout, there is obvious apprehension about the re-emergence of AuM and its fugitive leader, Mushtaq Zargar (a.k.a. Latram) on the Kashmiri militant landscape. Zargar's ties with Pakistan-based JeM and his recruitment campaigns bring the focus back on him, especially in the aftermath of the recent attacks against Indian paramilitary forces.

Zargar—Forerunner of Kashmir Militancy

In December 1999, terrorists affiliated with the Pakistan-based Harkat-ul-Mujahideen hijacked Indian Airlines Flight 814 en route from

Kathmandu, Nepal to Delhi, India, with over 180 people on-board as hostages. After being flown to several locations, the flight was finally made to land in Kandahar, Afghanistan. The hostage crisis lasted a week, with negotiations ending in the release of three terrorist commanders—Masood Azhar, Mushtaq Zargar, and British-born Omar Saeed Sheikh, who were languishing in Indian jails.

While Azhar and Sheikh went to Pakistan following their safe passage and quickly unleashed a fresh wave of terror activities targeting the United States and India, Zargar went into hiding in Pakistan-Administered Kashmir (PAK). The 51-year-old Zargar—an Indian citizen and one of the pioneers of militancy in Kashmir—resurfaced after a years-long hiatus in Pakistan, only to unleash his vengeance against India. He resumed his subversive activities with renewed support from Pakistan's intelligence agencies and Kashmir-centric militant groups like JeM and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). He has been inciting anti-India sentiments in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) for over a decade now, keeping the security establishment on edge.

While Zargar kept a low profile in the years following his safe passage, the two terrorists released alongside him achieved international notoriety. Azhar founded Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) immediately after his release and continues his jihadist tirades against India today, while Sheikh pursued pro-al-Qaeda and pro-Taliban activities in Pakistan, and was arrested again in February 2002.

While Zargar never joined JeM or LeT officially, it is an open secret that he is working closely with Masood Azhar and Hafiz Saeed's Lashkar-e-Taiba. In many interviews, as well as through his Twitter account (active at the time of the writing of this article), Zargar has admitted to his proximity to these leaders and their jihadist organizations. Zargar's associations with Azhar date back to his days incarcerated in the Kot Bhalwal jail in Jammu and the Tihar jail in New Delhi. Their partnership can be credited for giving Azhar and his group a strong foothold inside the state. It is believed that Zargar's dormant AuM network is facilitating the operations of the Pakistan-based militant groups JeM and LeT inside Kashmir by providing local recruits and logistics.

Emergence of Al-Umar-Mujahideen

Born and raised in the Nowhatta area of Srinagar, Zargar spearheaded violence against the Indian government in the 1980s as a member of two secessionist groups—the People's League (PL) and Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). Before 1990, Zargar had made a few trips to Pakistan to participate in militant training at camps run by Afghan war veterans under the auspices of Pakistani intelligence agencies. During that period, PL's Zahoor Sheikh mentored him briefly and reportedly sent him to join training camps operated by JKLF across the border in Pakistan (*Frontline*, January 8, 2000). He later actively joined JKLF and was inspired by JKLF's Ashfaq Majeed Wani, who motivated him to take up arms against India.

However, his violent actions in Indian Kashmir and operational differences with Yashin Mallick, the leader of JKLF, forced him out of the group. Soon, he established AuM, named after the Umar ibn Al-Khattab, the second caliph of the Rashidun Caliphate. However, it was also widely believed that the group was named after the Srinagar-based radical cleric Maulvi Umar Farooq. AuM received support from Farooq's Awami Action Committee and covertly from Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI). AuM's offices and training camps in Muzzafarabad, Kotli, and Keel sectors in Pakistan were directly supported by Pakistani intelligence agencies, with Majid Tariq of the ISI supervising the training of its recruits at one point. At the height of the Kashmiri militancy, AuM and Zargar's fellow operatives were active in the state capital Srinagar, as well as the Pulwama, Baramulla, and Kupwara districts of Jammu and Kashmir.

Eventually, AuM's fighting capabilities waned due to infighting and turf wars with Hizbul Mujahideen and JKLF. They further weakened after the arrest of Zargar in May 1992 and triggered subsequent disruptions within his group until his release in December 1999. At least four abduction attempts were made to free him from prison between 1992-1999.

AuM and Zargar received maximum support from Kashmiri refugees in Pakistan thanks to their aim of liberating Kashmir through armed struggle and eventually merging with Pakistan. AuM continued unleashing mayhem in Kashmir, targeting local Pandit communities (Kashmiri Brahmin Hindus) and security personnel, until 1992. Zargar became infamous for his use of abductions for prisoner exchanges and extortion.

He was instrumental in spearheading several high-profile kidnappings, including that of Rubaiya Sayeed, the daughter of then-Indian Home Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed on December 8, 1989. He, of course, denies involvement in this abduction ([Kashmir Monitor](#), September 5, 2017). According to one estimate, Zargar was responsible for around 40 murders that included several Kashmiri Pandits. This targeted violence largely contributed to the exodus of Hindu communities from the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley area between 1989 and 1990.

Terror Provocateur

Over the years, AuM has lost its relevance to security agencies in India, but Zargar has never shied away from showing his and AuM's shadowy presence in Kashmir through media interviews and posts on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. His interviews have appeared in Pakistan's jihadist magazines, such as *Jihad-e-Kashmir* (affiliated with JeM) and *Al-Dawa* (affiliated with LeT), indicating strong operational ties with these groups. In one such interview with *Al-Dawa* in 2003, he had said that LeT and AuM militants had carried out several *fidayeen* (suicide) missions in India. Zargar has also extended support to the LeT-linked terrorist group Tehreek-Azadi Jammu and Kashmir. His Twitter feed and intermittent calls to media groups in Kashmir are testimony to his support for JeM and LeT activities in the state, as well as in Pakistan. One such message of support for Pakistan that he posted stated: "*Pakistan Hamari Jaan, Pakistan Zindabad, Kashmir Banayga Pakistan, Inshallah we want freedom*" (Pakistan is our life, long live Pakistan, Kashmir will turn into Pakistan)

([Twitter.com/Mushtaq_Zargar](https://twitter.com/Mushtaq_Zargar), October 20, 2018). He has been vocal about Pakistan's political, diplomatic, and moral support for Kashmiri militants. [1]

When Kashmir witnessed a series of massive civil protest rallies starting in 2010, Zargar and his patrons in Pakistan found it conducive to revive armed struggle in the state. He entered the fray in 2013, fanning anti-India sentiment in the aftermath of Kashmiri militant Muhammad Afzal Guru's execution for his role in the 2001 attack on the Indian parliament ([Kashmir Watch](#), February 23, 2013). Observers believe that Zargar, along with other militant leaders, devised the stone-throwing strategy to attack security forces. In 2013, there were more than 500 stone-throwing incidents in Kashmir -- an exponential spike that followed Guru's hanging in New Delhi's Tihar jail in February of that year. In one of his interviews with The Kashmir Monitor, Mushtaq elaborated on how "stone pelters" are the "real militants" and are more courageous than those who have a gun in hand ([Kashmir Monitor](#), September 5, 2017).

Recently, AuM claimed responsibility for several terrorist attacks in Kashmir, including two targeting security forces. On October 14, 2016, AuM militants attacked a convoy of Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) paramilitary forces at Zakura, on the outskirts of Srinagar. One soldier was killed while eight others were injured ([DNA India](#), October 16, 2016). AuM has also claimed joint responsibility with JeM for at least four grenade attacks in Tral, Pulwama, Awantipora, and Safar Kadal in mid-June, 2017 ([Deccan Chronicle](#), June 15, 2017). He issued statements about the attacks as well as his ties with JeM's

Masood Azhar. "Moulvi Sahib (Masood Azar) is in Syria and I am in J&K but we are together and have the single cause of attacking Indian security forces in Kashmir till they leave J&K," he said. He reiterated that they had started the war in Kashmir "to do or die," and would increase attacks on security forces in the state ([India Today](#), June 14, 2017).

In late October 2018, Mushtaq Zargar paid tribute to two slain JeM militants, including the nephew of JeM's Masood Azhar, Usman Ibrahim, who had led a string of sniper attacks in south Kashmir's Tral area. Zargar told local media: "I salute [the] slain militants for their bravery [...] Usman was my nephew as well" ([JK News Observer](#), October 31, 2018). He regularly issues diktats against celebrating India's Republic Day in Kashmir, asking people to observe it as a "Black Day."

India has banned the AuM under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, 2002 ([Press Information Bureau/MHA](#), July 16, 2002). Although Zargar and AuM have maintained a low profile since his release from prison in 1999, and later, while he was holed up in Pakistan, it is no secret that he coordinated many attacks in Kashmir in close association with JeM and LeT. Zargar's organizational skills and the extent of his clout in and around the Srinagar area were specifically useful in influencing youths to join the Kashmiri jihad, and this still makes him an asset for Pakistan's intelligence agencies. At one point, an estimated 3,000 youths from different parts of Indian Jammu and Kashmir were undergoing training at various terrorist camps in PAK under the supervision of Zargar ([Daily Excelsior](#), February 20, 2008).

By virtue of his proximity to JeM—the main militant group accused of carrying out the latest spree of violence in Kashmir and being the biggest provider of recruits to Pakistan-based militant groups—Zargar will remain a potent provocateur of jihadism in Kashmir.

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Notes

[1] Baba Umar, “The Man We Released At Kandahar”: Interview with Mushtaq Zarag, *Tehleka*, Vol. 10 (9), 2013. Available at <http://umarblogs.blogspot.com/2013/08/exclusive-man-we-released-at-kandahar.html>

“An Average Young Tunisian”: A Profile of Aymen al-Samiri, Mastermind of the June 27 Tunis Double-Attack

Dario Cristiani

Introduction

From June 27 to July 3, Tunisia saw a series of chaotic events, as the country’s capital was struck by two nearly simultaneous suicide bombings, followed by a massive government manhunt for those behind the attacks. Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed defined these five days as being “difficult,” later adding that “thanks to the work of the security and military forces, and particularly the anti-terrorist unit, we managed to eliminate or arrest all the members of this group” (*HuffPost Maghreb*, July 3). Chahed was referring to the group that carried out the June 27 twin attacks in Tunis. Authorities arrested more than 20 people in connection with the attacks. The actual perpetrators of the attack and the leader of the cell were eliminated. The two suicide attackers were Mohammed Amin al-Kahlawi and Moncef al-Mansouri. Al-Kahlawi was a 28-year-old graduate in physical education, originally from Douar Hicher, historically the “radical area *par antonomasia*” of Tunis. Al-Mansouri was a 45-year-old security guard from Sidi Bouzid, an impoverished town in central Tunisia and the birthplace of the 2010-2011 Jasmine Revolution (*Jomhouria*, June 27).

The mastermind of the twin suicide attacks, however, was a much younger man, 23-year-old Aymen al-Samiri (usually spelled Smiri by local media, since the *a* is usually not pronounced in colloquial Tunisian). Despite his youth and apparent lack of significant militant experience, authorities labeled him as a “very dangerous

threat“ in the days after the two attacks ([Radio Mosaïque FM](#), July 4). On July 2, the authorities warned of the danger emanating from Samiri, and asked the public for information concerning his whereabouts. On the evening of July 3, security forces nearly captured Samiri. However, before he could be arrested he blew himself up at the above-ground light rail station in Hay (Cité) al-Intilaka in the area of Ettadhamen. Islamic State (IS)-Tunisia claimed responsibility for the twin attacks and Samiri's suicide bombing ([Tunisie Numerique](#), June 27). The group also hit the Tunisian headlines more recently, after some of its Tunisian members released a video, allegedly filmed near Kairouan, declaring their allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ([Kapitalis](#), July 19).

June 27: A Day of Chaos

June 27 was a chaotic day for Tunisia. In the morning, two suicide attacks occurred, one after the other. A suicide bomber attacked a police vehicle in downtown Tunis. The blast killed a municipal police officer and injured four people. A few minutes later, another suicide bomber attacked a police station in the area of El Gorjani, where the special anti-terrorist unit is headquartered. Hours before, at 3:00 AM, terrorists attacked a broadcasting station at Mount Arbata in the country's southern Gafsa governorate ([Realites](#), June 27). The events in Tunis were probably not connected with what happened in Gafsa, yet they were perceived to be part of the same wave. In addition, early afternoon that same day, unconfirmed rumors concerning the death of the Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi began flooding the Web, fueling confusion and further apprehension. An adviser had to confirm that the president was indeed taken to a military hospital following a severe health crisis, but that he was still alive. The day after the emergency, the government made clear that the president was recovering ([Jeune Afrique](#), June 27; [Anadolu Agency](#), June

27). Yet, his health was clearly deteriorating and it became known that the president had been sick for quite some time. He passed away on July 25, on Tunisia's Republic day, after being taken again to the capital's military hospital late on the evening of July 24. ([Espace Manager](#), July 24; [Jeune Afrique](#), July 25; [BusinessNews.Tn](#), July 25; [Liberation](#), July 25; [RFI](#), July 25).

However, the unfortunate coincidence of the timing of these attacks and the president's health issues created a tense environment. One observer called the day a second "Black Thursday" in Tunisian history, recalling the chaotic unrest that engulfed the country on January 26, 1978 ([African Manager](#), June 27). On "Black Thursday," one of the most important events in the history of independent Tunisia, general strikes in the country were met with unusually harsh repression, which resulted in dozens of people being killed and hundreds injured ([Jeune Afrique](#), January 26, 2018). The comparison was an obvious exaggeration, but it shows the alarm—in some cases, hysteria—with which many greeted these events as they were unfolding. In the following days, tension remained high across the country, and the events of July 3 were the culmination of this tension.

Aymen al-Samiri: Average Youngster, Terrorist Mastermind

On the evening of July 3, Samiri killed himself in a suicide bombing at the light rail station of Cite' Intilaka. Samiri was considered the *tête pensante* (mastermind) of the twin attacks in Tunis ([Radio Mosaïque FM](#), July 4). Not far from where he died, security forces found 10 kilograms of explosive material, carefully hidden under a tree planted in the patio of the El-Ghofrane mosque ([Radio Mosaïque FM](#), July 3; [HuffPost Maghreb](#), July 3). Later, authorities confirmed that this material belonged to Samiri and that he had plans to attack security patrols, foreign embassies, or commercial entities. Al-

Intilaka is part of the broader area of Ettadhamen, a rough neighborhood of the capital historically known for its high rates of crime. Ettadhamen also became a significant hotbed of radicalization after the 2011 revolution ([YouTube](#), May 21, 2013). Many locals traveled to Syria and Iraq. The Libya-based jihadist group Ansar al-Sharia had a strong presence in this area and controlled most of its mosques.

Samiri was born on March 19, 1996. The authorities released information on him the day before his death, as he was on the run from security forces who had information that he was preparing another attack. After his death, authorities did not release much more information.

Samiri's Facebook was allegedly still online immediately following his death, and those who saw it said it looked like the standard account of a man of his age. Indeed, a typical comment made by Tunisians after these events was that Samiri looked much like an average young Tunisian, and he had neither visible nor obvious symptoms of being radicalized. Interestingly, despite his youth, Samiri was considered the leader of this small cell. The men who carried out the suicide missions before him were older. This suggests he had strong leadership skills. In many of these radical circles, age, experience and seniority are typically essential factors in determining hierarchy, influence and control. However, that was not so in this case.

A vital element in understanding more about Samiri's profile is his origins. He was from Tunis, more precisely from the area of Hay Ibn Khaldoun, where he was living up to the time of his death. Hay Ibn Khaldoun is a low-income neighborhood located in the northwest area of the Tunisian capital ([YouTube](#), April 21, 2015). This neighborhood was created in the 1970s and was considered the first affordable mass housing

project in Tunisia's history. A rapidly expanding area, it accommodated people who were moving to the capital from different, rural regions of Tunisia. At that time, authorities feared the emergence of informal and unregulated neighborhoods, similar to what happened in Cairo, Egypt, which experienced a chaotic urbanization process. However, this area soon lost its primary function. From being a residential unit, it turned into a mixed-use, densely populated, mostly dysfunctional area that became home to petty crime, drunken fighting, and problems related to small-scale illegal activities. The neighborhood has since seen sporadic revolts against the police and the government over the past few years. For instance, this area was among the most active in the anti-austerity protests that shook Tunisia in early 2018 ([Tunis Webdo](#), January 10, 2018). Hay Ibn Khaldoun historically accommodated social groups coming from the most disparate areas of Tunisia. As such, this area—like many others with this type of socio-economic milieu—suffered from inter-communal tension based on conflicting regionalist sentiments.

Years before, this area hit the headlines in Tunisia when a father killed his daughter in what was considered an “honor killing.” The man murdered his teenage daughter after finding out she went back home from school alongside a male classmate ([Tunis Webdo](#), June 12, 2014). This episode elicited a significant reaction from across the country. In Tunisia, honor crimes are considered to be a rural thing of the past, and have almost completely disappeared. The fact that this happened in a neighborhood of the capital shocked the public. However, this episode was indicative of a larger tendency: the presence of a conservative and traditional mindset, and old-fashioned social habits, among Tunisia's populace. Indeed, being in an area historically devoted to welcoming people from other parts of Tunisia, it neither had a specific social, economic and cultural identity nor a clear historical

connection. This is markedly different from other, more established, areas of the capital. Inevitably, financial hardship, diverse geographic and socio-cultural backgrounds—which are particularly significant in a country where regionalism is still a significant problem—and overpopulation created the conditions for a remarkable level of dysfunction. The consequences became more visible in the aftermath of the revolution, as the presence of groups linked to transnational jihadist organizations grew ([Tunisie Numerique](#), September 20, 2016).

Similarities to—and Differences from—Other Cases

In many ways, Samiri's profile is similar to that of other radicalized Tunisians. Yassine Labadi, one of the perpetrators of the Bardo attacks in March 2015, was also from the Hay ibn Khaldoun neighborhood. He became radicalized in a mosque in El Omrane, a neighborhood adjacent to Hay Ibn Khaldoun and comparable in its socio-economic features. Like Samiri, Labadi was also considered an average Tunisian who suddenly became radicalized due to the growing influence of online propaganda ([Middle East Eye](#), March 21, 2015). However, unlike Samiri, Labadi went to Derna, Libya, where he trained with IS before returning to Tunisia. No evidence exists that Samiri did the same. It seems he was radicalized, and became a "significant threat," as defined by the Tunisian security services, without training abroad. This detail has several important implications for counter-terrorism in Tunisia. Over the past few years, Tunisian counter-terrorism was focused primarily on returnees from Syria and Iraq, or Tunisians and/or fighters of other nationalities who were fighting with IS in Libya. However, in those cases, there was a logic to follow in tracking them: they traveled before returning and were, in most of the cases, on the security forces' radar. In comparison, it is more difficult to spot and

anticipate the actions of those young Tunisians who were radicalized within the country and never traveled abroad, particularly if their families or immediate social environment do not suggest anything suspicious. This was also the case with the woman who blew herself up on October 29, 2018, on Avenue Bourguiba, injuring 20 persons. Mouna Guebla, a 30-year-old unemployed woman originally from small rural town of Zorda, was the first female suicide bomber in the history of Tunisia. She was also a complete unknown to security forces and was radicalized online. In her inner circle, no one noted any change. The hours spent alone in her room on her laptop, which the family could afford only after selling a few olive trees, were allegedly used to "prepare for her doctorate" as later claimed by her family ([Jeune Afrique](#), October 30, 2018).

Conclusion

Tunisian counter-terrorism capacities have strengthened significantly over the past few years, particularly after the wave of attacks in 2015. That said, there are still loopholes, and some terrorists can still slip through the net, as shown by the recent twin attacks in Tunis. These two attacks were not particularly sophisticated, yet they managed to create significant tension in the country. Samiri's prototype is that of a militant difficult to detect before he acts: not particularly well-trained, or experienced; young and somehow average in his appearance and outlook; with neither experience abroad nor structural connections with transnational groups, as he seemed to be more inspired by IS rather than being an active member. Despite all these weaknesses, however, his actions and plans kept Tunisia in a state of alert for five days.

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Death of Islamic State East Asia Leader Abu Dar Puts Philippine Militant Leadership in Flux

Zachary Abuza

On June 28, a pair of suicide bombers ([Rappler](#), June 29) struck a Philippine outpost, killing five and wounding nine. It was the third suicide bombing in a year, in a country that had so far not had any, raising fears of increased Islamic State influence. It comes at a time when IS cells in Southeast Asia are in flux, regrouping from the 2017 siege of Marawi, while IS in the midst of its own transformation following the loss of the caliphate.

On April 29, the leader of Islamic State (IS), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, made his first video appearance in several years. While he discussed with his staff IS' global operations following the loss of their Caliphate, he importantly did not mention the Islamic State in East Asia (ISEA), puzzling analysts. Was this simply an oversight? Or did it reflect frustration with the lackluster state of operations and current leadership void?

Starting in mid-2014, there was a gaggle of small militant groups and cells in Southeast Asia that pledged *bai'at* - allegiance - to al-Baghdadi. IS-Central never returned the recognition until early 2016, declaring the Abu Sayyaf leader, Isnlon Hapilon, to be the emir of the regional affiliate. Other groups were labeled "brigades." A formal *wilayat*, or province, was not declared until 2018, and only when IS began to lose significant parts of its territory in Syria and Iraq, and began to revert to a global insurgency model.

As IS-Central hemorrhaged territory in 2017-2018, IS militants in the Philippines began their five-month siege of the city of Marawi. That siege was planned and executed by Isnlon

Hapilon, the Maute brothers, and Humam Abdul Najib, a.k.a. Abu Dar.

More than 1,000 were killed in the bloody fighting that marked IS' most serious assault into Southeast Asia. It also saw IS releasing a slick video as part of its "Inside the Caliphate" series, calling on people to wage jihad in Marawi, drawing even more foreign fighters to the area.

The Mautes hailed from a family of Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) members, and had studied Islamic jurisprudence in the Middle East, before returning to Lanao del Sur and forming a group aligned with Islamic State -- Khilafa Islamiyah. Hapilon, had brought his men from Basilan, an island where the Abu Sayyaf had made a strident comeback, after U.S.-assisted Philippine forces had declared the island pacified. Hapilon's men engaged in savage fighting. Abu Dar had traveled to Afghanistan in 2005, where he was trained as a bomb-maker. In 2012, he returned to the Philippines, where he joined his cousins, the Mautes, in establishing Khilafa Islamiyah.

Islamic State announced the establishment of the Islamic State in East Asia (ISEA) *wilayat* in July 2016, but sent very mixed signals about it, seemingly walking back their own announcement.

Hapilon and the Maute brothers were killed in the final days of the Marawi siege, along with a leading Malaysian militant, Dr. Mahmud Ahmad, but Abu Dar slipped out of the city and started to regroup his forces ([New Strait Times](#), November 1, 2017; [Rappler](#), March 5, 2018).

Dar sought to take advantage of the government's botched reconstruction of Marawi and tens of thousands of disaffected displaced peoples, as well as skeptical combatants from MILF, who were opting out of the peace process with the government. Dar, the senior-most IS

leader in the Philippines, was responsible for a number of attacks throughout 2018 ([Benar News](#), September 7, 2018).

A large bounty was placed on Dar's head, and his wife, Nafisa Pundug, was arrested in the southern city of General Santos in April 2018 ([Benar News](#), June 22, 2018; [Rappler](#), July 16, 2018).

A March 14 gunfight that left three members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) dead, resulted in the death of Abu Dar. DNA tests confirmed his death a month later ([Benar News](#) May 14).

Dar was one of the rare militants in the southern Philippines who helped bridge the parochial splits among small militant groups, which tend to be organized along ethnic and tribal lines. He was responsible for infiltrating militants from Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Middle East into Marawi, giving him a leading role in maintaining international networks ([Benar News](#), June 22, 2018).

Dar's death has had a real impact on the course of the Islamic State's operations in the Philippines. His IS cell was actively regrouping; it was engaged in small-scale offensive operations, and he was able to maintain the pipeline of men and resources from Southeast Asia to augment their ranks.

There is no clear successor to Abu Dar. But Furuji Indama and Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan are the figures to watch.

Furuji Indama, known for his brutality, hails from Basilan and emerged as Isnilon Hapilon's deputy as the Abu Sayyaf regrouped in 2014. The most gratuitously violent acts in the country are invariably tied to him.

He was thought to be in charge of the group behind the beheading of 14 Philippine soldiers in 2014. Indama led a bloody attack in April 2016 that left 22 soldiers dead ([Channel News Asia](#), October 17, 2017). In July 2016, in an attack that foreshadowed the siege of Marawi, Hapilon and Indama attacked and held a village in Tipo raising the Islamic State flag; displacing more than 1,000 people ([GMA Network](#), July 7, 2016).

When Hapilon left Basilan in early 2017 with many of his men to join the Mautes for the first combined operation with another militant group under the Islamic State banner in Marawi, he left Indama in charge of Abu Sayyaf forces on Basilan. The violence escalated.

Indama was responsible for the beheading of seven loggers in July 2017, and the following month, his men attacked a village, destroying all government buildings, including a health clinic. Nine were killed and 10 wounded in the attack ([Benar News](#), July 31, 2017; [Rappler](#), August 21, 2017).

Indama is equal parts militant and warlord, with a penchant for extortion, especially of large-scale development projects ([Rappler](#), August 1, 2018). The May 2015 beheading of a telephone company employee working for a project that ran through Indama's territory was a clear signal that any commercial project in his territory can only happen with his blessing ([Inquirer.net](#), May 4, 2015).

But Indama's real threat may be in his role as the new conduit for foreign fighters in and out of the southern Philippines. In August 2017, Malaysian authorities arrested one of his top aides, Hajar Abdul Mubin, a.k.a. Abu Asrie, who was planning terrorist attacks in Kuala Lumpur ([Rappler](#), September 3, 2017). A series of arrests in 2018 in Malaysia's Sabah state, a critical transit hub in and out of Indonesia and

Malaysia, exposed his reach. Malaysian police uncovered two large cells that were fundraising for him, moving militants, and providing other logistical support ([Benar News](#), February 21, 2018).

In January and February 2018, Malaysian police arrested 10 people in Sabah; one of the seven Filipino members of the cell was a top aide of Furuji Indama ([Channel News Asia](#), February 21, 2018). In March, two additional members of the Abu Sayyaf, including a trained bomb-maker tied to Indama, were arrested ([Benar News](#), March 26, 2018). That November, Malaysian authorities disrupted an eight-person cell that included six members of the Abu Sayyaf and another aide to Indama ([Benar News](#), November 16, 2018).

Indama's Basian cell has been less involved with kidnapping for ransom than the Sulu faction, now headed by Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan ([Associated Press](#), February 21), which has fully involved itself in kidnapping of both locals and foreigners, as well as maritime ship-jackings.

Sawadjaan's cell was responsible for the 2015 kidnapping of two Canadians and a Norwegian from Davao. The former were executed in 2016, and in 2017, a German national was beheaded ([SCMP](#), June 13, 2016). One of Sawadjaan's key aides is Behn Tatu, thought to be the man who executed the two Canadians and who is active on social media ([Global News](#), December 20, 2018).

More importantly, Indama's leadership within the broader Islamic State movement is not clear. Hapilon, until his death, was the emir of ISEA, and Indama was his deputy. But he remained in Basilan, running the ASG. Indeed, the current relationship between Islamic State and the Abu Sayyaf is unclear.

Two major terrorist attacks in the past year suggest that the key node between the Abu

Sayyaf and IS Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan ([AP News](#), February 21).

On July 31, 2018, a Moroccan man, Abu Kathir al-Maghribi, drove up to a checkpoint outside of Lamitan town on Basilan Island, detonating an ammonium nitrate bomb, killing 10 ([Benar News](#), August 3, 2018). The fatalities included a soldier, five paramilitary members, and three civilians, among them a woman and a child. That operation was led by the Jolo-based Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan, a long-time Abu Sayyaf commander.

Then in January of this year, there was a double bombing at a cathedral during Sunday Mass on the island of Jolo ([Rappler](#), January 28). The suicide bombings were perpetrated by an Indonesian couple, who had attempted to join the Islamic State in Syria before being returned to Indonesia. The pair had traveled to Sulu, where they joined Sawadjaan. IS claimed responsibility for the attack ([Benar News](#), July 23). The attack killed 23 people and wounded more than 100.

The latest attack on a military outpost in Sulu, was allegedly the work of a pair of suicide bombers. Significantly, the bombers were Filipinos, the first from the country to engage in a suicide bombing ([Benar News](#), July 2). But the third suicide bombing in less than a year certainly raises questions of whether this is being directed by IS, or a local commander like Sawadjaan is simply trying to make the case for an unequivocal declaration of a *wilayat*. Amaq News Agency claimed credit for the attack. And the attack clearly reflects increased radicalization.

IS claimed responsibility for the attacks, though they were clearly supported by the Abu Sayyaf in their attack on Basilan Island, and they likely perpetrated the double bombing at the cathedral in Jolo. ISEA command and control, as well as

coordination with the Islamic State's central command, is unclear. But it is evident that Islamic State will rely more and more on regional affiliates to broaden the battlefield, as IS morphs into a global insurgency.

The U.S. Department of Defense believes that Sawadjaan is the acting emir of ISEA, but there is no official recognition of either him or Inadama from IS-Central.

Both Indama and Sawadjaan have a proven reach into Malaysia, in terms of both logistics and operations. Due to the death of militants such as Zulkifli bin Hir, Dr. Mahmud Ahmad, and Abu Dar, Sawadjaan has become the point man for foreign militants entering the Philippines for training and operational experience. Sawadjaan's daughter married a Malaysian militant, Amin Baco, who was part of the Marawi siege. He is likely poised to take on a greater leadership position in ISEA.

As such, both Indama and Sawadjaan have become the AFP's main targets ([Benar News](#), April 24). Authorities have expressed concern that Indama has dispatched lieutenants to Manila to carry out terror attacks to pressure the government into ending its offensive. Authorities arrested two ASG operatives working on his orders in Quezon City in April, and two others in June ([Rappler](#), April 15; [Benar News](#), June 17).

In late June, IS released a video about current operations in the Philippines, part of a series about the global jihad. While much of the video was recycled, it is believed that the video was narrated by Sawadjaan, himself.

In July, Indonesian police arrested a member of the IS-linked Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), who was receiving funds and orders from a new Southeast Asian IS leader based in Khorasan Afghanistan. The previous month, Malaysian police arrested an Indonesian who was charged

with further developing the logistics networks to get personnel in and out of the southern Philippines ([Benar News](#), July 23).

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