



MILITANT LEADERSHIP MONITOR

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Souleymane Ag Bakawa, Abraham Boubacar, and Abu Dahdah: ISGS Loses Trio of Commanders in Mali

Jacob Zenn

Executive Summary

- Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) recently lost three major commanders, Souleymane Ag Bakawa ("Soldat"), Abraham Boubacar ("Oubel"), and Abu Dahdah. ISGS's losses are expected to reduce the tempo of the group's attacks and potentially cede ground in the region's jihadist ecosystem to al-Qaeda affiliate Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims.
- Soldat and Abu Dahdah are believed to have been killed, while Oubel surrendered to Malian troops with ten of his men.

On June 9, Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) claimed responsibility for an attack

in Tessit, Mali, near the border with Niger and Burkina Faso. The attack allegedly killed 40 Malian soldiers and destroyed 15 vehicles, according to ISGS. Local reports and the group's photos largely substantiated ISGS's claims ([YouTube/France 24](#), June 11). This attack in Tessit, along with subsequent attacks by the group, occurred despite ISGS's loss of three of its commanders: "Soldat," "Oubel," and "Abu Dahdah" ([Zagazola](#), June 28). ISGS has proven resilient: just as the group's attacks continued after the deaths of former leader Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi and his deputy Abdelhakim Sahrawi in 2021, ISGS seems poised to continue its operations under different commanders ([France 24](#), September 16, 2021).

"Soldat" was the alias used by Souleymane Ag Bakawa. Soldat is believed to have been killed by the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) in the Ménaka Region, not far from Tessit. He had undergone FAMA training before deserting and becoming a militant, and his understanding of the Malian Armed Forces made him particularly effective ([Afrik.com](#), July 22). According to the FAMA, he masterminded the assassinations of security forces in Ménaka and also

contributed to the execution and kidnapping of civilians ([APAnews](#), July 21). The region is wracked by kidnappings attributed to Islamist groups, many of which featured ISGS's signature operational style, even if the group did not claim responsibility for them. A recent example includes a local civil society leader in Ménaka ([West Africa Democracy Radio](#), May 21).

"Oubel" was the alias of Abrahim Boubacar, who, unlike Soldat, surrendered to FAMa on June 28 ([West Africa Weekly](#), June 29). It was unclear why Oubel surrendered himself, 10 of his fighters, and their weapons to the security forces. The surrendering militants were provided a military escort on their trip to a nearby town. Taken together, this and the way Oubel surrendered suggest his surrender may have been prearranged with the FAMa. One possible reason for Oubel's defection from ISGS is the killing of another of the group's major commanders just a day before. Abu Daḥdāḥ was killed near Ménaka by the FAMa on June 28 ([APAnews](#), July 2). As one of the few Moroccans in ISGS ranks, he may have stuck out from his fellow fighters ([West Africa Weekly](#), June 28).

In addition to Abu Daḥdāḥ, one of his sub-commanders, Abu al-Gabassa, and several other bodyguards and militants were killed in the same operation. A short clip of the counter-terrorism effort was put out by the Russian Africa Corps ([African Initiative](#), June 29; [X/@fabsenbln](#), June 28). Daḥdāḥ had been among the key commanders to take over for Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi and his deputy Abdelhakim Sahrawi after their deaths.

ISGS's loss of three major commanders and a portion of their cohorts could represent a serious setback for the organization. This will not necessarily stifle the group's operations, given its multiple brigades of fighters, but could lead to a slowdown, especially in the Ménaka Region. Ironically, it also means the FAMa and Russian Africa Corps may see a rise in attacks by the al-Qaeda-affiliated

organization Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) in Ménaka, which is likely to exploit ISGS's weakness to encroach on territory that has until now been heavily contested between the two rival jihadist groups.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Militant Leadership Monitor.

Mazloun Abdi: SDF Commander-in-Chief's Star on the Rise

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

Executive Summary

- Mazloun Abdi is the commander-in-chief of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and a major player in Syria's new political environment. Abdi is expected to continue to use his support among the country's Kurdish population and close relationship with the United States as leverage against interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa's efforts to centralize the state. He will be a key player in Syrian politics for the long term.
- Abdi, born Farhād 'Abdi Shahīn, made a name for himself internationally for the role he played in the People's Protection Units (YPG) after the Syrian Civil War erupted in 2011. He has been considered an ally of the United States since he joined forces with the U.S.-led coalition to fight Islamic State in 2014.
- Turkey objects to Abdi's relationship with the United States and is suspected of having tried to assassinate him in 2023.

Mazloun Abdi, born Farhād 'Abdi Shahīn (also known as General Mazloun Kobani and Şahîn Cilo), is commander-in-chief of

the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) ([The Syrian Observer](#), March 31, 2020). He was born in the Helinj village near the Kurdish town of Kobani in 1967 in northeastern Syria and is part of the Eladînan tribe and Berazi tribal confederation ([Euronews](#), October 24, 2019; [BBC](#), October 25, 2019). [1] Eladînan tribe members are present in Kobani and parts of Aleppo in northern Syria, as well as across the border in the Kurdish town of Suruc in the Urfa Province in Turkey.

Abdi was trained as a civil engineer at the University of Aleppo and joined the PKK in the 1990s ([New Yorker](#), October 20, 2019; [Le Point](#), January 16, 2023). According to the BBC, he met the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, when he was a child ([BBC](#), October 25, 2019). Öcalan visited Kobani for the first time and established links with local tribes in 1979, but he fled before the Turkish military coup in 1980 ([Medya News](#), February 9). Many of the SDF's current leadership are from Kobani ([Washington Institute](#), June 22, 2021).

Before becoming known as Mazloum Abdi, Abdi was known by his PKK codename, Şahîn Cilo. Under that name, he played executive roles in the PKK (both in Kurdistan and in Europe) from 1997 to 2003, even surviving an assassination attempt in the Netherlands in 1999 ([BBC](#), October 25, 2019; [Le Point](#), January 16, 2023). In 2013, he was interviewed on the situation in Syrian Kurdistan as a Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) Executive Council Member by the pro-PKK Firat News Agency (ANF) in Iraqi Kurdistan ([ANF News](#), July 20, 2013). Abdi was also put on the Turkish Ministry of the Interior's Interpol "Red Notice" list afterwards ([Daily Sabah](#), October 25, 2019).

Abdi in the Syrian Civil War

Abdi made a name for himself internationally for the role he played in the People's Protection Units (YPG) after the Syrian Civil War erupted in 2011. Despite

his initial anonymity, Abdi first established relations with the United States after Islamic State (IS) attacked the Yezidi town of Sinjar in 2014 ([New Yorker](#), October 20, 2019). The YPG opened a corridor to Sinjar from Syria through which many Yezidis were saved. During the 2014 battle for Kobani against IS, an alliance was formed between the YPG and the U.S.-led coalition, which still remains in place. In October 2015, the YPG was rebranded as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in which Mazloum has played a vital role ([Kurdistan 24](#), December 21, 2024).

Abdi was not well known until after Turkey struck the YPG's headquarters in Mount Karachok, near Derik in Syrian Kurdistan, on April 25, 2017 ([Reuters](#), April 25, 2017). Following the event, Abdi was pictured at the bombed location site with a U.S. commander. Later, Abdi became known as Commander-in-Chief of the SDF, playing a key role in coordination with the United States in major campaigns against IS, including in Manbij in 2016, Raqqa in 2016–2017, and Deir ez-Zor in 2019.

Abdi spoke with U.S. President Donald Trump on the phone on October 23, 2019, after the Turkish "Peace Spring" Operation was launched on October 9, 2019, in Tell Abyad and Serekaniye (Ras al-'Ain) ([X/@realDonaldTrump](#), October 23, 2019; [Al Jazeera](#), November 8, 2019). This was part of an effort to reach a ceasefire, in which Abdi was reportedly invited to the United States ([NPR](#), October 25, 2019). The meeting never took place due to Turkish opposition.

Abdi on the International Stage

In 2019, Abdi signed an action plan with the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, to prevent child recruitment in the SDF. This further cemented his diplomatic role internationally ([United Nations](#), July 1, 2019). In 2021, there were also rumors that Abdi would take on an administrative role and be replaced by the YPG's Mahmud Berxwedan. These rumors proved false,

and Abdi continued to lead the SDF ([Kurdistan 24](#), Sep 12, 2021).

Meanwhile, Turkey continued to be vexed by Abdi's strong relations with the United States. On April 7, 2023, Turkish forces attempted to kill him at the Silemani (Sulaymaniyyah) International Airport while U.S. forces were also present ([Rudaw](#), April 8, 2023). After the fall of the al-Assad regime in Syria on December 8, 2024, Abdi's position became even more recognized within Kurdish politics. On January 16, he publicly attended an audience with Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader Masoud Barzani as a part of efforts to form a united Kurdish position toward the new administration in Damascus ([Masoud Barzani](#), January 16). On April 24, Abdi met with Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani, along with French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot ([The National](#), April 24; [Kurdistan Presidency](#), April 24).

Abdi has further played a key role in negotiations with the new administration in Damascus. On March 10, he signed a tentative agreement with interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa in Damascus, and the two met again in July ([Washington Institute](#), April 2; [Al Arabiya](#), July 9). On July 19, Abdi met with the United States Special Envoy to Syria, Ambassador Thomas J. Barrack, where the Ambassador "thanked Mazloum for his leadership." This comment helped confirm views that Abdi is respected by American decision-makers and secured his place domestically as an important figure, responsible for maintaining Syria's stability and security ([X/@USEmbassySyria](#), July 19).

Conclusion

The current political trajectory of the SDF Commander-in-Chief, Mazloum Abdi, shows he will play a decisive role in the near future in the politics of Western (Syrian) Kurdistan, as much as in Syrian politics as a whole. He will likely continue building strong international relationships. Already a prominent leader, he is slowly

becoming the political face of the Syrian Kurds, including as their representative in Damascus. His political career is also strongly tied to his relationship with the American military, which has come to trust him due to his competence and integrity during joint operations. The closeness of these ties has developed in spite of strong Turkish opposition. Over the years, Abdi has also built a strong base of support among Syrian Kurds and Kurds elsewhere, and is now one of the most significant powerbrokers within the emerging politics of the new Syrian Arab Republic.

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Notes:

[1] Author's interview with a source in Kobani, July 28, 2025.

Saw Chit Thu: Karen Warlord, Leader of Scam Center Empire

Khandakar Tahmid Rejwan

Executive Summary

- Saw Chit Thu is a warlord active in Karen State in southeastern Myanmar. Thu's Karen Border Guard Force controls a stretch of the Thai–Myanmar border. Once an ally of the ruling junta, Thu appears to have switched sides after witnessing the rebels' military success since 2023.
- The rebel forces' successes and international pressure have forced Thu to crack down on the illegal operations in his territory that are believed to finance much of his activities. If this trend continues, Thu and the Karen Border Guard Force are expected to lose prominence as his resources dry up.
- Inside his territory, Thu has been accused of overseeing a regime of human trafficking, "coercion, intimidation, physical abuse, and inhumane torture," largely in connection with scam centers and illegal casinos. Thu has managed to secure extensive investments into his territory by Chinese Cambodian businessman She Zhijiang and is suspected of having close ties to illicit networks in the region.

In southeastern Myanmar, a notorious warlord named Saw Chit Thu has been making a fortune by running scam centers, engaging in human trafficking, and extortion. While gaining wealth and

influence along the Thai–Myanmar border through his militia forces, Thu has been accused of overseeing a regime of "coercion, intimidation, physical abuse, and inhumane torture" ([The Nation](#) [Thailand], January 15; [Global Anti-Scam Organization](#), March 7). A master of shifting allegiances, Thu has been sanctioned by the United Kingdom (2023), the European Union (2024), and the United States (2025) for supporting Myanmar's junta and the regime's human rights abuses ([Al Jazeera](#), May 2, 2024; [European Commission](#), October 10, 2024; [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), May 5). Now, Thu also faces intense pressure and scrutiny from Thailand and the People's Republic of China (PRC), as both countries are pushing him to shut down the scam centers, which forcibly employ around 150,000 people from various countries (including the PRC, Thailand, the United States, Japan, Vietnam, and others). **[1]**

Early Life and Military Career: A Saga of Shifting Loyalties

Thu was born in 1969 as San Myint into a low-income family in the small village of Inn in Karen State ([U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), May 5; [The Irrawaddy](#), July 1). He was deprived of any opportunity to receive a formal education and came of age in a war-torn environment. In 1988, he joined the most prominent ethnic rebel group in Myanmar, the Karen National Union (KNU), as a member of Special Battalion 101's armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Thu became close to General Tin Maung, the 7th KNU Brigade commander ([The Nation](#) [Thailand], February 12; [JFM](#), May 22, 2024).

The KNU is a predominantly Christian force. Stirred by the rhetoric of a Buddhist monk named Myaing Gyi Ngu Sayadaw, Thu, then a junior commander, and his Buddhist allies broke away from KNU and formed the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) in 1994. The DKBA signed a ceasefire with Myanmar's military and then started fighting against the KNU (Frontier

Myanmar, [December 16, 2019](#), [January 21](#)). The group took control of a stretch of territory and several lucrative border-crossing points for illegal trade with Thailand that were previously under KNU control. The Sit-tat (military) government allowed the DKBA to keep control of its border enclave and the illegal revenue it generated, encouraging the group to expand its activities into the formal economy ([Frontier Myanmar](#), August 20, 2019).

From 1995 to 2010, Thu was a key commander of the DKBA. He fought against his ethnic Karen brethren and took control of a significant portion of the strategically vital Thai-Myanmar border regions. In 1995, Thu led the DKBA's 999 Special Battalion, which famously captured Kawmoora, a major KNU stronghold in the South Karen area. Thu and his troops also engaged in multiple cross-border atrocities, such as entering Thailand to kill civilians and burn refugee camps. Various human rights groups, including the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), carefully documented these crimes ([Asia Times](#), May 13).

Forming the Karen Border Guard Force

In 2010, nearly 6,000 men from 12 DKBA Battalions and a battalion of the Karen Peace Front merged to form the Karen Border Guard Force (BGF). Thu became its General Secretary de facto commander. Thu's forces comprised battalions 1011 to 1023 ([Frontier Myanmar](#), August 20, 2019; [The Irrawaddy](#), January 25, 2024). The Karen BGF became the most powerful and well-equipped force "guarding" the border and was integrated into the official order of battle of the Sit-tat's forces. This allowed the group to receive salaries, logistical support, rations, and weapons from the regime. It also operated jointly with the Sit-tat in buffer zones where the KNU and other rebel groups held no stronghold ([Frontier Myanmar](#), January 27, 2021).

Thu is reportedly popular among his soldiers. In 2021, the junta pressured him

to resign over the scam center scandals. Thu agreed to resign under pressure, leading his 13 battalion commanders and 90 officers to threaten resignation unless he was reinstated ([The Irrawaddy](#), January 18, 2021). The Sit-tat ultimately had to yield to this demand, as the disintegration of the Karen BGF at that time would have allowed hostile rebel groups to attack more easily.

In January 2024, just months after rebel forces launched "Operation 1027," Thu again shifted his loyalty and announced his departure from the junta's chain of command ([The Irrawaddy](#), January 25, 2024). The group was renamed the Karen National Army (KNA) and pledged to strengthen unity among Karen armed groups ([Grey Dynamics](#), April 8). His troops reportedly withdrew from joint security posts with the Sit-tat and changed their shoulder patches ([RFA](#), January 25, 2024).

Crime-Militia Nexus: The Dark Web King of Southeast Asia

Thu leads a luxurious life as an influential militia leader. His wealthy lifestyle mainly stems from his extensive network of shady businesses. Thu has been accused of profiting from illegal ventures, such as scam call centers and illicit casinos. His main project is Yatai New City, located near the Thai-Myanmar border in an area now known as Shwe Kokko (once a small village given to Thu by the junta as a reward for his loyalty) ([Justice for Myanmar](#), May 22, 2024; [Grey Dynamics](#), April 8). In 2017, Thu signed a deal to transform Shwe Kokko into a city-sized real estate development with Yatai International Holdings, owned by the notorious Chinese Cambodian businessman and criminal She Zhijiang (who is currently jailed in Thailand awaiting extradition to the PRC for operating illegal gambling businesses). Under this deal, Yatai acquired the right to develop Shwe Kokko as a special economic zone without the permission of Myanmar's government, which will feature an airport, luxury housing, an 1,200-room hotel, casinos, supermarkets, an industrial zone, and

logistics depots covering 180,000 acres of land (approximately 281 square miles, an area larger than Chicago) with an estimated \$15 billion investment ([Frontier Myanmar](#), August 20, 2019; [JFM](#), May 22, 2024).

Yatai New City, currently under construction, has already become a hotspot for casinos and scam centers. Thu's other scam center ventures are run via Myanmar Apolo International Investment Company Limited (Apollo Park) and Yulong Bay Resort Tourism Development Company Limited (Yulong Bay Park) ([Justice for Myanmar](#), May 22, 2024; [Thai PBS](#), February 21; [Nikkei Asia](#), July 11). These scam centers are spread throughout the zones controlled by Thu and employ over 100,000 people. Workers at these centers face abuse, with many reportedly dying from harsh conditions. Citizens from the United States, the European Union, Japan, the PRC, Thailand, Vietnam, India, and other countries reportedly have been trafficked into these scam centers ([The Irrawaddy](#), February 20; [Nikkei Asia](#), July 11).

Although Thu denies the allegations, his supervision of the area suggests that scam centers and casinos operate with his approval. It is estimated that the KNA earns \$190 million annually from these illegal activities ([Firstpost](#), April 26, 2024). Indeed, the United Kingdom, European Union, and United States have all imposed sanctions on him and his key associates for enabling human trafficking, smuggling, organized crime, forced labor, and human rights abuses in the scam centers and gambling operations active in the southern borderlands of Karen State. Following his recent defection from the Sit-tat, Thu now collects revenue from Yatai's New City's employees and taxes locals for protection and safety. This revenue mainly funds his militia, where a recruit earns nearly \$190 monthly, roughly twice the average ([Frontier Myanmar](#), April 8, 2024; [World Data](#), accessed August 26).

Personal Life: The Benevolent Militia Commander

In his free time, Thu is known to enjoy music and playing golf. Although he is widely recognized as a crime boss, he is "religious" and follows Buddhism, partially maintaining a vegetarian diet. Thu is credited with building many pagodas across his hometown in Hlaingbwe. He also lives in a luxurious villa with an entrance decorated with large pictures of his grandchildren, while his garage is filled with dozens of expensive cars. Thu also owns an expensive jade ring. He has an obsession with the number 1: his regular car has a license plate 3331 at the end, and his office room number is 9991 ([The Nation \[Thailand\]](#), [March 3](#), [March 7](#)).

Thu has two sons who are majors in the Karen BGF/KNA: Saw Htoo Eh Moo and Saw Chit Chit. Moo is heavily involved in BGF/KNA businesses, while the other son, Chit, participated in military operations alongside the Sit-tat and served as a director of at least five Karen BGF/KNA businesses. Thu also has a daughter named Nan Hnin Nandar Aye, who studied in Singapore and the United Kingdom. She owns shares and holds directorships in at least four KNA companies ([Justice for Myanmar](#), May 22, 2024). Thu's wife does not own shares of KNA-linked companies, but is involved in some of the family's business operations. Thu and his children own 50 percent or more of six Karen BGF/KNA businesses ([Justice for Myanmar](#), May 22, 2024).

Nonetheless, after decades of impunity, Thu is facing the most critical phase of his life. Since the start of "Operation 1027" in October 2023, the scam centers in Shan State have mostly been shut down, if not completely disbanded, due to Chinese pressure on the ethnic rebel armies. This has also brought the Karen State scam centers under scrutiny from international actors. As a result, in January, Thu ordered a crackdown on scam centers after a Chinese celebrity was trafficked and Chinese businessmen put pressure on him

to end the practice ([The Irrawaddy](#), February 6; [The Nation](#) [Myanmar], February 19). Later, in February, the PRC's Assistant Minister for Public Security, Liu Zhongyi, visited the scam centers in KNA-controlled zones of Myawaddy and met with 1,000 scam center workers rescued by the KBGF ([The Straits Times](#), February 18). In the same month, Thailand's Department of Special Investigation (DSI) requested an arrest warrant for Thu from a court, which later ordered the DSI to gather further proof of allegations against Thu. Thailand has also cut off electricity, internet access, and the supply of fuel to five KNA-controlled areas ([Democratic Voice of Burma](#), February 11; [The Irrawaddy](#), February 20).

Conclusion

Since the crackdown on the KNA, at least 7,000 people have been awaiting repatriation to their home countries, while many scam centers are believed to be operating as usual ([Global Anti-Scam Organization](#), March 7). Nonetheless, a final blow came to Thu came when the United States imposed sanctions on him and his two sons in May over the facilitation of organized crime and his family's links to scam center operations ([RFA](#), May 5). In July, the Sit-tat blacklisted one of his companies for failing to deposit foreign currency export earnings in the regime-owned bank ([The Irrawaddy](#), July 1). Overall, it appears Thu is in trouble, and his response appears to be attempting to bolster his image by acting against the scam centers under his territorial control. The irony is that his militia's survival and wealth depend on the very same illegal facilities that he is now cracking down on. Thu's contradictory interests and actions pose a significant challenge to his survival as a leader and may determine the fate of KNA as well.

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tank focused on international, national, and societal security and politics.

Notes:

[1] Scam centers, especially in Myanmar, run illegal online schemes and are often controlled by organized crime syndicates from the PRC and other East Asian and Southeast Asian countries. Scammers frequently contact victims on social media and messaging apps to build online relationships before persuading them to make fraudulent investments, such as in cryptocurrencies, a scheme commonly called "pig butchering." Some scam sites also operate money laundering and illegal gambling activities.

Thadiyantavide Nazeer: Lashkar-e-Taiba-Linked Ideologue Recruiting in India From Prison

Animesh Roul

Executive Summary

- Thadiyantavide Nazeer is a key Islamic extremist associated with the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) in Pakistan and India's homegrown jihadist group, Indian Mujahedeen (IM), and has been under arrest since 2013. Nazeer has managed to use his time in prison to radicalize others and was at the center of a cell of radicalized individuals who served time at Bengaluru's Central Prison.
- Nazeer gained notoriety for his involvement with a series of bombings in the mid-2000s. He was an adept recruiter at this time.
- Nazeer was acquitted in 2022 for his suspected association with several of the bombings he is alleged to have been a part of due to insufficient evidence and/or procedural lapses. He continues to serve a life sentence for his involvement in at least one attack and for recruiting youths into LeT.

Thadiyantavide Nazeer is a key Islamic extremist associated with the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) in Pakistan and India's homegrown jihadist group, Indian Mujahedeen (IM). He is currently serving a life sentence in the Bengaluru Central Prison. Nazeer's checkered journey into the world of crime and terrorism spans over two decades, marked by vandalism, bombings, trials, and acquittals. His life story demonstrates the intersection

between terrorist recruitment and prison radicalization in India.

Background and Key Operations

Nazeer, also known as Ummer Haji, is a native of the Thayyil locality of Kannur in the state of Kerala. He came into prominence for his involvement in terrorist activities during the mid-2000s. In his early years, Nazeer was involved in the left-wing Students Federation of India (SFI), which is the student wing of the Marxist-oriented Communist Party of India (CPI) in Kerala. He later joined Jamiaathul Ishanya (JI), a fundamentalist Sunni faction that was behind several attacks against Hindu leaders and Islamic reformists in South India. [1]

Nazeer was one of the main figures accused in the Tamil Nadu state transport bus burning in 2005 in the town of Kalamassery in Ernakulam, Kerala. The incident involved pro-Islamist People's Democratic Party (PDP) operatives engaging in violent protests to free their leader, Abdul Nasser Madani, a firebrand Islamic cleric detained in connection with the 1998 Coimbatore bomb attacks that killed and injured over 250 people ([Hindustan Times](#), December 17, 2010). Nazeer and four associates were part of a bombing conspiracy that targeted the Coimbatore Press Club in December 2002 to take revenge for police brutality against Madani and his wife, Soofia ([Times of India](#), December 10, 2009).

Kashmir Recruitment

Nazeer rose to prominence when he joined Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba, and soon after played a pivotal role in recruiting Indian youths for jihad in Kashmir. On March 3, 2006, Nazeer was associated with twin blasts at two bus stands in Kozhikode, Kerala ([Hindustan Times](#), March 3, 2006; [Decan Herald](#), January 24, 2019). The blasts were reportedly carried out to avenge the denial of bail to 130 people arrested in the 2003 Marad communal

violence in Kerala, incited by an Islamist mob ([Outlook India](#), June 6, 2003).

Around the same time in 2006, Nazeer was also involved in the infamous Kashmir terror recruitment network. Nazeer helped recruit Keralite Muslims and provide them with arms training to carry out attacks in India. He reportedly scouted more than a hundred youths in Kerala, of which several were sent to attend terror training camps in Kashmir. The network came to light in October 2008 when four Kerala-origin militants were gunned down in two separate encounters in Kupwara and Lolab in Kashmir ([India Today](#), November 18, 2008).

Further investigation into the case confirmed Nazeer's role in terror recruitment and training. He was later found guilty under Indian Penal Code (IPC) section 121(A) related to conspiracy to commit anti-Indian subversive acts. The investigations also found that under Nazeer's supervision, several militant sleeper units were operating in Kerala under the guise of charity organizations and health care units ([New Indian Express](#), October 2, 2013; [Manorama Online](#), May 9, 2022).

Ties to Indian Mujahedeen

Nazeer's involvement with the Indian Mujahedeen surfaced during investigations into bombing cases in South India in 2008 and 2009. His arrest in December 2009 near the Bangladesh border and subsequent interrogation provided crucial evidence about countrywide bombing cases. He was reportedly heading IM's Kerala unit known as Jamiat Ansarul Muslimeen (JIAM), which was active in the Kannur, Ernakulam, and Kasargod districts of Kerala. ([New India Express](#), September 11, 2013).

Nazeer's name figured prominently during the investigations into the July 2008 Bengaluru blasts. The attack involved the detonation of at least nine bombs in different parts of the city that killed one

and injured nine others. In 2011, a National Investigation Agency (NIA) court found Nazeer and a relative, Shafas Shamsuddin, guilty of offences under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act ([Hindustan Times](#), August 11, 2011). These coordinated attacks in Bengaluru brought Nazeer onto the radar of India's security agencies, leading to his arrest and life imprisonment in 2013.

After almost a decade, the Kerala High Court in January 2022 exonerated Nazeer in the 2006 Kozhikode, Kerala twin blasts case, overturning his life imprisonment sentence ([Matrubhumi](#), January 27, 2022). Again, in September 2023, an Ernakulam Court acquitted Nazeer and two others for a 2008 case involving a bomb planted near Jawahar Municipal Stadium in Kannur. The court also acquitted him in a 2009 case related to the seizure of explosives from a house in Chembilode village, Kannur ([New Indian Express](#), September 1, 2023).

Bengaluru Prison Radicalization Case

Despite the several acquittals that primarily arose due to delays in his prosecution and insufficient evidence, Nazeer continues to be in jail. Nazeer still serves a life sentence for assisting LeT in recruiting Kerala youths to engage in jihadism and his direct involvement in the 2008 Bengaluru terrorist attack. While in jail, Nazeer was a central figure in a prison radicalization case at Bengaluru's Central Prison, wherein Nazeer introduced fellow inmates to extremist ideology, going on to groom them to commit violent attacks, focusing on Indian targets.

Nazeer's core network in prison comprised five Islamists identified as Mohammed Umar, Faisal Rabbani, Tanveer Ahmed, Mohammed Farooq, and Junaid Ahmed. After their release, these individuals coordinated operations, fundraising, and the procurement of arms and ammunition for LeT. India's National Investigation Agency seized arms and ammunition, money, digital devices, and other incriminating documents from the premises

of these individuals during a raid in December 2023 ([NIA](#), December 13, 2023). In March 2024, the NIA again raided multiple locations across the country in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Punjab, Gujarat, and West Bengal when expanding the investigative scope of Nazeer's prison radicalization network across India ([National Investigation Agency](#), March 5).

Conclusion

Despite his incarceration, Nazeer has continued to coordinate terror networks from behind bars. His deep-rooted connections with various terror networks in India and abroad and his ability to influence and radicalize Muslim youths within and outside prison cells have made him a critical threat. His multiple acquittals, including in high-profile cases like the 2006 Kozhikode twin blasts, also underscore the challenges faced by India's legal system in securing convictions in complex terrorism-related cases. This has often been due to insufficient evidence or procedural lapses. Even as his direct involvement in committing terrorist attacks has waned, Nazeer and others like him underscore the idea that incarceration of terrorists in light of a lacking judicial and penal system does not necessarily put an end to their activities. Some manage to continue to wage their own wars by different means.

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Notes:

[1] JI was behind the death of Islamic reformist Chekannoor Moulavi in July 1993 and pro-Hindu Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) activist Thozhiyoor Sunil in December 1994 ([India Today](#), October 2, 2013; [Manorama Online](#), October 13, 2019).