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Anas Abdulrahman: Ethnic Malay Muslim Militant Leader Fails to Rein in Insurgents in Southern Thailand

Jacob Zenn

In February 2024, Anas Abdulrahman, a leader of the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), an ethnic Malay Muslim militant group, met and agreed with Thai authorities on a "joint comprehensive plan." This plan would, in theory, lead to a roadmap for peace in southern Thailand. Abdulrahman rejected the hardline position held by some militants in the "Patani insurgency," with Patani referring to Thailand's south. Some of these insurgents call for independence from Thailand and the establishment of their own state, citing alleged ostracization of Malay Muslims in predominantly Buddhist Thailand. Rather, Abdulrahman's focus has been on "identity, economic and developmental issues, human rights, education, culture, and the security system," which would allow ethnic Malay Muslims to secure a place within the Thai state ([Benar News](#), February 7).

In 2024, there was optimism from both Abdulrahman and his Thai counterparts that a "lasting solution" would be found

Executive Summary

- In February 2024, negotiations between Thailand and Anas Abdulrahman, a leader of the ethnic Malay Muslim militant group Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), raised hopes that the region's ongoing insurgency could be brought to an end. Since then, Abdulrahman has shown little ability to compel his own militants to follow through with a ceasefire. As a result, violence in southern Thailand continues unabated.
- Thai officials now view Abdulrahman as a weak player with insufficient influence over his movement to effect real change. As a result, Bangkok has turned increasingly toward working with Malaysian negotiators. This appears unlikely to work, as the latter have even less influence over the ethnic Malay Muslim militant movement.

([Associated Press](#), February 7, 2024). However, just over a year and a half later, Abdulrahman is nowhere to be seen, while Thai officials look to quell violence in the country's three southern provinces. Thai officials believe everyone with whom they have negotiated, including Abdulrahman, is incapable of reining in the region's militants. This situation took on heightened urgency when Malay Muslim militants in southern Thailand conducted more than 10 bombings and six shootings of civilians before Ramadan in April ([Bangkok Post](#), May 11).

The southern Thai insurgency is increasingly decentralized. The turning point in Thailand's awareness of this new reality was when Abdulrahman engaged in "shuttle diplomacy" in February with Thailand's National Security Council head to implement a Ramadan ceasefire ([Benar News](#), March 14). Despite these efforts, the BRN leader was unable to follow through with securing a ceasefire, and southern Thailand was wracked by a series of attacks during Ramadan. Although Thai government officials ruled out the possibility that Abdulrahman had collaborated with the militants to add pressure in support of his position in negotiations, the attacks still demonstrated how little control the rebel leader has over violence on the ground ([Khaosod](#), March 9).

As a result of Abdulrahman's inability to rein in either the BRN or the more hardline insurgents, the Thai government is refusing to conduct further negotiations with him. Rather, the Thai government is leaning on the Malaysian government's facilitators to work with the BRN and other factions to follow through on a ceasefire ([The Nation](#) [Thailand], April 30). If Abdulrahman was unable to convince his own men to follow a ceasefire, it seems less likely that the Malaysian government, which is quite removed from the violence on the ground, can have an impact. Abdulrahman may not have as much influence over the insurgents as his interlocutors initially believed, but he may

eventually prove to be the "least-worst" option for Thai officials seeking a negotiated solution to the smoldering insurgency in the country's south.

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Naim Qassem: Hezbollah Secretary-General Rejects Disarmament

Rami Jameel

Executive Summary

- On August 15, Hezbollah's new secretary-general, Naim Qassem, rejected Lebanon's U.S.-backed disarmament plan. Lebanon's eventual reconstruction hinges on Hezbollah's disarmament. The situation has deepened sectarian divides as Shia factions remain loyal but strained by losses sustained in the war with Israel.
- After Hezbollah secretary-generals Nasrallah and Safieddine were killed in 2024, Qassem rose to lead Hezbollah, inheriting an organization weakened by Israel's invasion and the loss of thousands of fighters and most senior commanders.
- A longtime deputy but not a *sayyid*, Qassem lacks Nasrallah's charisma and status, but aligns firmly with Iran and vows continued resistance against Israel and the United States.

On August 15, Naim Qassem (Arabic: نعيم قاسم), secretary-general of Hezbollah, made his defiance of the Lebanese government's disarmament plan clear. The government had adopted an American-initiated peace plan with Israel based on disarming Hezbollah, which is largely funded and armed by Iran. Qassem accused the government of giving in to and cooperating with Israel, vowing to resist the plan, even if it led to another Lebanese civil war ([Al Jazeera](#), August 15).

Since he assumed leadership of Hezbollah in October 2024, Qassem has shown no signs of making concessions. This is despite the significantly weaker position his group has found itself in since its engagements with Israel in 2024. Hezbollah had continually launched small strikes against Israel amid the latter's ongoing Israel-Gaza War, ultimately leading to Israel's full-scale invasion of southern Lebanon on October 1. A U.S.-negotiated ceasefire was adopted on November 26. In less than two months, Hezbollah suffered its most serious blow in over two decades, losing 4,000 fighters (per its own sources) and sustaining leadership, personnel, and arms losses so severe as to be in "crisis" even a year later ([The Times of Israel](#), November 28, 2024; [Deutsche Welle](#), September 27). However, Qassem's recent threat indicates that the conflict may yet take further dramatic turns and indicates that Hezbollah retains the will to fight.

After Nasrallah

Hezbollah suffered a major blow when its charismatic leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah (Arabic: الله ناصر حسن) was killed in an Israeli airstrike in his southern Beirut stronghold on September 27, 2024 ([Sky News Arabia](#), September 28, 2024). The assassination was part of an Israeli campaign that killed several other key military and political leaders of Hezbollah, including commanders Ibrahim Aqil, Fuad Shukr, and Ali Karaki (Arabic: عقيل إبراهيم; شكر فؤاد; كركي علي) ([France 24](#), September 24, 2024). Nasrallah's immediate presumed successor, Hashem Safieddine

(Arabic: الدين صفى هاشم), was eliminated in another Israeli airstrike a week after Nasrallah's death ([Al Arabiya](#), October 23, 2024).

It became clear after Safieddine's killing that any new Hezbollah leader would automatically become a direct target for Israel while it experienced unprecedented military (especially air) superiority over Hezbollah. Naim Qassem, from his former position as deputy secretary-general, took on the top leadership role and became Hezbollah's face of continuity after so much of its prior leadership had been killed in targeted Israeli airstrikes or eliminated in the infamous Israeli pager operation that preceded the subsequent invasion ([YouTube/عربية نيوز سكاي](#), September 17). Qassem released a video message shortly after the killing of Nasrallah, where he vowed to continue the fight ([Al-Quds Al-Arabi](#), October 30, 2024). Qassem's first TV address was clearly hastily prepared and filmed with poor lighting from what appeared to be a hiding place ([Sky News Arabia](#), October 8, 2024).

Although the filming quality of videos with Qassem improved in later speeches, Israeli military pressure continued, and Qassem remained completely hidden. By the time the ceasefire deal was reached in November 2024, Hezbollah was in a weakened (arguably debilitating) military position as it suffered major casualties within its ranks, to say nothing of its high-level leadership ([Al Liwaa](#), January 22). The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in neighboring Syria, a key Hezbollah ally, further placed Qassem, Hezbollah, and its Lebanese Shia base of support in an even more dire strategic condition.

Qassem's first year at the head of Hezbollah has been full of challenges. In Lebanon and beyond, his success will depend on whether he steers Hezbollah out of its current troubles. As Hezbollah has not surrendered, despite its floundering military conditions at the time of the ceasefire agreement, the coming period will likely become the biggest test for the

organization—and especially its new leader—since the group’s founding in 1982 ([raialyoum](#), October 15, 2024).

Qassem’s Early Career

Naim Qassem was born in the town of Kafr Fila (Arabic: كفر فيلة) in southern Lebanon in 1953 to a Shia family ([naimkassem.com.lb](#), accessed September 28). He graduated from the Lebanese University in Beirut with a master’s degree in chemistry in 1977. While attending, Qassem also studied Shia Islamic theology through religious classes and seminars, including with some of Lebanon’s eminent clerics, and became an established Islamic preacher and educator ([Al Arabiya](#), October 29, 2024).

It was Qassem’s parallel path of studying and teaching theology that led him to prominence. He joined the emerging Shia Islamist political movement during the nascent phase of his country’s sectarian civil war in the mid-1970s. Specifically, Qassem joined the political movement called *Harakat al-Mahroumeen* (Arabic: حركة المحرومين, “Movement of the Deprived”), founded by the charismatic Shia cleric Musa al-Sadr (Arabic: موسى الصدر) in 1974. The movement developed quickly to exert political influence under the name of *Harakat al-Amal* (Arabic: حركة الأمل, “The Hope Movement,” often referred to as “Amal”), which also operated an armed wing. The mysterious disappearance of al-Sadr during a visit with Muammar Gaddafi in Libya in 1978 was a painful shock for Amal. However, the movement persisted, and Qassem went on to hold more senior leadership in the movement as head of Amal’s cultural affairs. This position included elements of public communications, propaganda, and ideological guidance ([Al Jazeera](#), September 20, 2024).

Influence of the Iranian Islamic Revolution

The triumph of the Iranian revolution of 1979 had a historic impact on Shias in the

Middle East. After Qassem became a member of the Lebanese branch of the Islamic Dawa Party (Arabic: الدعوة حزب الإسلامية), a Shia Islamist movement founded by Iraqi Shia cleric Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr (Arabic: الصدر باقر محمد), Musa al-Sadr’s cousin, and worked across Lebanon in support of expanding the Islamic Revolution. [1]

When Israel launched its full-scale invasion of Lebanon in June 1982, Hezbollah emerged as a new Iranian project in Lebanon able to resist the Israeli occupation. The group was founded as an armed group of young Shia clerics, trained and organized by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Hezbollah developed a small but effective military unit in Lebanon. In the following years, Hezbollah’s political wing was formed by the merging of two groups: an Islamist faction that split from Amal and the Lebanese branch of the Dawa Party. Qassem had been a member of all the groups that formed Hezbollah, and therefore was well-positioned to be near the helm of the organization ([Al-Araby Al-Jadeed](#), October 29, 2024).

When Hezbollah’s formation was officially announced in early 1985, Qassem was a member of the highest echelon of the group, managing a portfolio in education and public affairs. At the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990, Hezbollah emerged as a powerful military force with significant support from Iran and Syria, with the latter deploying troops in Lebanon and acquiring a very high degree of control over its neighbor’s politics. In the 1990s, Hezbollah softened its radical Islamist revolutionary position and became involved in the political life of Lebanon, which necessitated collaborating with Christians, Sunni Muslims, and the country’s other ethnic, religious, and political factions. Qassem ultimately became Hezbollah deputy secretary-general in 1991, and since then has overseen Hezbollah’s parliamentary and government affairs ([Al Jazeera](#), September 20).

Question of Succession

Qassem was not necessarily the obvious choice to succeed Nasrallah. In 1992, when Hezbollah's secretary-general Abbas al-Musawi (Arabic: *الأمير موسى عباس*) was killed in an Israeli strike, Qassem was looked over. Nasrallah, ten years younger than Qassem, became the new secretary general.

There were several reasons for the selection of Nasrallah over Qassem. Firstly, Nasrallah's appointment reportedly came as a direct order from Iran, which viewed Nasrallah as a "genuine" member of Hezbollah's first generation and a sincere fighter for the Iranian revolution's regional axis. He was a true believer in the Iranian ideology of *Velayat-e Faghih* (Farsi, from Arabic: *الولاية الفقيهية*, lit. "Guardianship of the Jurist"), a Twelver Shia doctrine which asserts that the Iranian Supreme Leader holds authority over all Muslims. In contrast, Qassem had a history of working with other Shia organizations that preceded the Iranian revolution. It was reported that the mere possibility that Qassem might have a slight tendency for more balanced relations with Iran would be unacceptable to officials in Tehran. As a result, there was no contest for the secretary-general position, nor did Qassem show any ambition for it. Accordingly, he went on to serve as Nasrallah's loyal lieutenant for the following three decades.

It is also important to note that Qassem is not a *sayyid* (Arabic: *سَيِّد*, lit. "master," male descendant of Prophet Muhammad), a status which confers significant respect in Shia society. Rather, he is a "sheikh" who wears a white turban—a learned man of irrelevant background. In contrast, Nasrallah was a *sayyid* who wore the appropriate black turban to display his high status. *Sayyids* in Shia Islam are widely recognized as favorites to occupy leadership positions ([Al-Shiraa](#), October 29, 2009). Qassem's lack of *sayyid* status could also explain part of why Qassem was overlooked again when Nasrallah was killed, and *sayyid* Hashem Safedine, another senior Hezbollah leader, was

selected as a successor. Safieddine, Nasrallah's cousin, also enjoyed very strong ties with Iran. In addition, he boasted family links with the late Iranian general Qasem Soleimani, formerly the commander of IRGC operations across the Middle East until his 2020 assassination by a U.S. airstrike ([Asharq Al-Awsat](#), October 23, 2024).

In his first speech as secretary-general, Qassem needed to address his relationship with Iran. Hezbollah critics in Lebanon accused the organization of dragging all of Lebanon into a doomed war with Israel on Iran's orders. Qassem argued that it was in both Hezbollah's and Lebanon's direct interest to fight Israel and that Iran had been helping Hezbollah without any strings attached. He cited the late Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as authoritative figures, emphasizing the ideological commitment of himself and Hezbollah to the Islamic Republic's leadership ([Arabi21](#), October 30, 2024).

Conclusion

Qassem's tone became particularly defiant only a few days after a key visit by Iran's newly appointed chairman of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Larijani (Farsi: *لاریجانی علی*), to Lebanon and Iraq. Larijani has been entrusted by Supreme Leader Khamenei to shape and implement Iran's strategy to counter Israeli and American threats since the "12-Day War" in June. Strategically, it is not in Iran's interests for Hezbollah to give in, and therefore Tehran and its representatives insist the group must not accept being disarmed. Qassem has chosen to stick to his group's historical alliance with Iran ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), August 14).

During his visit to Lebanon, Larijani met twice with President Joseph Aoun (Arabic: *عون جوزيف*), the country's most senior Christian official, and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam (Arabic: *سلام ذواف*), its most senior Sunni politician. Both made their

differences with Iran clear regarding their vision of Lebanon's future as compared with Iran's plans for the country ([Al Arabiya](#), August 13). Lebanon is under immense pressure from the United States and Sunni Arab nations, which will not donate funds for the country's needed post-war reconstruction if the government does not disarm Hezbollah and restore sovereign government control over the whole of Lebanon. This would necessarily move the country away from Hezbollah's decades-long domination ([Waradana](#), April 20).

Lebanon's sectarian divide has widened significantly over the future of Hezbollah and the Lebanese government. All major factions are represented in the parliament and government in the Lebanese confessional system. When the Lebanese cabinet hosted the commander of the army to celebrate the army's plan to disarm Hezbollah, all the Shia cabinet members withdrew from the session, including the representatives of Hezbollah, Amal, and one independent minister ([Arabi21](#), September 5). Although Hezbollah still attracts the solidarity of Lebanese Shia with Qassem as its leader, the group suffered significantly in the 2024 war, which disproportionately affected southern Lebanon's Shia strongholds. This could mean a serious challenge, as Hezbollah's traditional base must weigh its ideological commitments against the continued cost of a war that Hezbollah looks poised to choose.

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Notes:

[1] The al-Sadr family comes originally from southern Lebanon but later migrated to Iraq and Iran. Musa al-Sadr grew up in Iran, but migrated back to Lebanon in the late 1950s. Muhammed Baqir was from the Iraqi branch of the family. He founded the Islamic Dawa Party in the late 1950s, but was executed by Saddam Hussein's government in 1980 after he was accused

of supporting and coordinating with Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran. Although there was no public coordination of efforts between the two cousins, the purpose of their movements was similar, including counteracting the rising influence of secular ideologies, such as communism and pan-Arab nationalism, on Shia youth.

Abdul Haq Wasiq: Afghan Taliban Spymaster Possibly Detained in Guantanamo Engages with CIA

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

Executive Summary

- Mullah Abdul Haq Wasiq, Taliban intelligence chief and former Guantanamo detainee, has become central to Afghanistan's internal security and counter-Islamic State efforts.
- Once tied to al-Qaeda, Wasiq now engages in high-level talks with the CIA, including negotiations over detained Americans and coordination against Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP).
- Wasiq's trajectory—from Taliban spymaster to Guantanamo prisoner, then to negotiator in Doha and now Taliban intelligence head—illustrates the paradox of a onetime enemy turned pragmatic counterpart for the United States.

In March, Afghanistan's top security and intelligence officials presented an "Afghanistan Security Report" to the Taliban's supreme leader, aiming to

enhance the operational capabilities of the country's defense and intelligence apparatus. Mullah Abdul Haq Wasiq (Pashto/Dari: وډ يقي ابدال حق), the chief of intelligence, was among the key figures who prepared and presented this report ([Bakhtar News Agency](#), March 28). He is a senior Taliban leader, playing a key role in addressing the internal and external security challenges in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

From Sanctions to Security Official

Wasiq was once a UN-sanctioned Taliban leader when he served as Deputy Minister of Intelligence in the first Taliban regime (1996–2001) ([Afghan Bios](#), August 18). Now, in the same role for the current Taliban government, he is unsanctioned. In fact, Wasiq has found common ground with the United Nations and the United States in countering the threat presented by Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS–KP).

Wasiq gained additional prominence when he led a high-level Taliban intelligence officials' delegation in a May 2024 meeting with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in Doha ([Media Line](#), April 28, 2024). The agenda of the meeting between the Taliban and CIA intelligence officials was to negotiate the release of a Taliban member held in Guantanamo Bay, in exchange for the release of two Americans detained by the Taliban for allegedly violating local laws. The Taliban government spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid (Pashto/Dari: مجاهد الله ذب یح) confirmed the detention of Ryan Corbett, who had worked in Afghanistan for several years and was arrested in northern Afghanistan in August 2022. The negotiations stalled without any deal reached, and Corbett has since remained in Taliban custody ([Afghanistan International](#), May 24, 2024). The other individual in custody is unnamed.

This was not the first intelligence meeting between the Taliban and the CIA. In 2022, a few months after U.S. forces killed al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri in a drone strike in Pakistan, both parties met in

Doha. While the U.S. delegation was headed by CIA deputy director David Cohen, Wasiq led the Taliban delegation. The main focus of the meeting was not al-Zawahiri, but the release of frozen Afghan funds and the fight against IS–KP, a mutual enemy of both the Taliban and the United States ([Middle East Monitor](#), October 10, 2022).

Early Life and Career

Wasiq was born in 1975 in Ghazni Province, Afghanistan, to a family from the Andar Pashtun tribe ([Afghan Bios](#), August 18). He received his earliest religious education and training under his father, Muhammed Saleem, until his father died in 1981. Thereafter, his three brothers supported the family, and he continued his education with their help. From 1984, Wasiq engaged in Islamic studies for two years in Warah (Dari: مرواره) at a school located on the Afghanistan–Pakistan border near the Khyber Pass. Eight years later, at the age of 18, he furthered his Islamic education at the Zia-ul-Madaris seminary in Pakistan's southwestern city of Quetta ([GITMO FILES](#), January 21, 2008).

Wasiq's interrogation files from his time in Guantanamo Bay accused him of maintaining close ties to al-Qaeda ([Economic Times](#) [India], September 8, 2021). This is substantiated by the fact that under the previous Taliban regime, Wasiq directed domestic investigations, including overseeing the Taliban's relationship with Osama bin Laden–allied foreign fighters and training camps ([Counter Extremism Project](#), August 18). The Afghan intelligence agency he led at that time also fielded vast networks of informants and agents ([Economic Times](#), September 8, 2021).

At Guantanamo Bay

Mullah Wasiq's intelligence portfolio was interrupted during the 12 years he spent in Guantanamo Bay detention camps from 2002 to 2014 ([Tolo News](#), September 13, 2020). His capture was the result of a sting

operation in late 2001 in Ghazni. Wasiq was deceived by a subordinate, who had travelled to Pakistan to engage in an important meeting; Wasiq was told by the subordinate that a meeting had been arranged with Karim Khalili (Dari: کریم خلیلی), the leader of the Hizbe Wahdat political party (Dari: وحدت حزب, "Unity Party"). Wasiq was told that Khalili could negotiate a security guarantee with the United States for safe passage for Taliban forces fleeing southern Afghanistan.

Instead, when Wasiq reached the agreed meeting place, Khalili was not there—he was instead detained by a U.S. special forces team ([Afghanistan Analysts Network](#), March 9, 2012). Wasiq was ultimately transferred from Guantanamo Bay to Qatar alongside four other Taliban detainees. The so-called "Taliban Five," including Wasiq as well as Khairullah Khairkhwa, Mohammad Fazl, Noorullah Nuri, and Mohammad Nabi Omari (Dari: محمد نوری نور الله, فاضل محمد, امذیر خو خیر الله, عمری نبی), were released in exchange for captive American soldier, Bowe Bergdahl. Under the prisoner swap mediated by Qatar, all of the released Taliban leaders were prohibited from travelling outside Qatar ([Al Jazeera](#), June 1, 2014).

Wasiq was later among the 21-member Taliban delegation that engaged in peace negotiations with the United States in Qatar in 2020. This culminated in the Doha Accords and withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2021. Wasiq was able to return to Afghanistan thereafter ([Tolo News](#), September 13, 2020).

Conclusion

Wasiq rejoined Afghanistan's intelligence service in 2021 at a time when the war-torn country was facing both internal and external security challenges. Since becoming the Taliban's intelligence head, he has been working to counter the threat to the Taliban's government both at home and from abroad. He is, therefore, playing a key role in the Taliban's own counter-insurgency against IS-KP, which has

targeted Taliban officials and foreigners in Afghanistan ([Tolo News](#), July 26, 2024). This is one of the primary reasons he is now engaged in high-level meetings with the same CIA officials who had long been his enemy.

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Manesa Tabuni: The Rival Government in the Papuan Independence Movement

Irma Rahim

Executive Summary

- Menase Tabuni became chairman of United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) in 2023, replacing Benny Wenda's "government-in-waiting" of the Papuan independence movement with a new constitution and headquarters in Vanuatu, sparking a bitter leadership split.
- Wenda, backed by the West Papua People's Forum (FRWP), mobilized thousands and re-declared himself chairman, creating two rival factions: Tabuni's ULMWP and Wenda's Oxford-based government-in-waiting.

On September 3, 2023, Manesa Tabuni was elected chairman of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) for the 2023–2028 term. The ULMWP is the primary political vehicle of the Papuan

independence movement against Indonesia, and has brought together all parts of the West Papua movement, both inside and outside Indonesia, to apply for permanent membership in the Melanesia Spearhead Group (MSG). The MSG is a regional organization comprised of Melanesian countries—Fiji, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands—along with a coalition of political parties in the French territory of New Caledonia, known as the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS). Essentially, the Papuan movement is looking for recognition from established nations with whom Papuans are ethnic and cultural relatives, to bolster the movement's international legitimacy.

Tabuni's election victory resulted from the second summit of the ULMWP directly after the 22nd MSG meeting in August 2023. At the subsequent 23rd MSG meeting in Vanuatu, MSG denied ULMWP its application for permanent membership, which was submitted in 2018. During this second summit, 50 ULMWP representatives discussed the results of the failed application and established the ULMWP's new path forward and organizational structure for the next five years, until 2028.

Upon assuming the ULMWP chairmanship, Tabuni's first act was to declare the replacement of the organization's 2020 temporary constitution with a new 2023 ULMWP constitution. Tabuni claimed the 2020 temporary constitution that led to the establishment of the West Papua government-in-waiting in Oxford, United Kingdom, led by Benny Wenda, was inconsistent with the foundational ULMWP constitutions ([Tribun-medan.com](https://tribun-medan.com), February 9, 2022). As chairman of ULMWP, Tabuni seeks to advance Papua further on the path toward independence from Indonesia, though he faces numerous internal organizational obstacles.

Tabuni as the Chairman of ULMWP

Tabuni participated in the Koteka Tribal Assembly (an organization for tribes that wear *koteka*, a traditional Papuan garment), where Benny Wenda has held the position of secretary-general since 2000. This motivated Tabuni to join the ULMWP in 2014 when the separatist movement was established (bicu-journal, February 1, 2022). Later, in 2018, Tabuni continued to support Wenda and ULMWP by serving as both the chief of the ULMWP's defense department and the organization's vice president when Wenda was elected the second chairman of ULMWP in 2017. Ultimately, Tabuni became the chairman of ULMWP in 2023, after the organization had agreed to extend Wenda's term from 2017–2020 until the end of the COVID-19 pandemic ([Cenderawasih Pos](https://cenderawasih-pos), September 8, 2023; [Tribun-papua.com](https://tribun-papua.com), November 20, 2023; [WAGADEI.ID](https://wagadei.id), November 28, 2023).

On September 4, 2024, Tabuni, as ULMWP's newly elected chairman, promptly issued two significant decisions based on the new 2023 constitution. First, a ULMWP permanent headquarters was to be opened in Port Vila, Vanuatu, for West Papua to counter the Indonesian government's argument that ULMWP does not represent on-the-ground West Papuan aspirations, arguing that its leader, Wenda, is in "exile" in the United Kingdom. Secondly, Tabuni annulled the 2020 ULMWP temporary constitution, theoretically dissolving Wenda's West Papua government-in-waiting in the United Kingdom ([Jubi Papua](https://jubi-papua), October 21, 2023). Tabuni's actions fed Wenda supporters' anger and exacerbated the public dispute between Tabuni and Wenda.

Tabuni and the West Papua People Forum Movement (FRWP)

An important third party in their dispute was General Mathias Wenda, the former head of ULMWP and commander of the West Papua Army, who passed away at the age of 104 in April (ulmwp.org, April 11; tempo, April 16; jubi.id, April 17). General

Wenda, a relative of Benny Wenda, had previously been appointed as the military commander of ULMWP in 2022 under the younger Wenda's chairmanship ([CNN Indonesia](#), December 2, 2019). Through an open letter, General Wenda sparked a movement to reinstate the 2020 temporary ULMWP Constitution that was foundational for both the West Papua government-in-waiting and the position of interim president held by Benny Wenda. As Tabuni prepared for the ULMWP working group meeting at the end of November 2023, Buchtar Tabuni, the ULMWP's second chief of legislation, established the West Papua People Forum (Indonesian: *Forum Rakyat West Papua*, or FRWP) ([papua.tribunnews](#), November 22, 2023). The forum aims to mobilize the masses to enact a referendum for independence from Indonesian rule under the ULMWP.

On November 6, 2023, FRWP organized a mass demonstration involving seven tribes at the residence of Buchtar Tabuni in Jayapura, the capital of Papua Province in Indonesia. The mobilization led to the establishment of a two-day meeting of the FRWP, which issued the FRWP declaration and formed a congressional committee for the new organization's first congress ([IPARI](#), November 6, 2023; [bennywenda.org](#), November 6, 2023). The proposed agenda of the congress held then was to change the chairman's election procedure from a rotating structure to a popular vote ([bennywenda.org](#), November 6, 2023). This popular vote would allow Wenda to reclaim his position as the chairman of ULMWP ([bennywenda.org](#), November 6, 2023).

On the first day of the FRWP's first congress, Tabuni held a press conference to provide a detailed account of how the second summit in Port Vila, Vanuatu, was organized and to clarify the process by which consensus was achieved. He argued that the first FRWP congress was unconstitutional and did not represent the ULMWP but rather a new faction that was dedicated to maintaining the 2020 temporary constitution and Wenda's West

Papua government-in-waiting ([Tribun-papua.com](#), November 20, 2023). Meanwhile, through the FRWP movement, Wenda (who watched the first congress virtually from Oxford) successfully mobilized 5,000 attendees representing seven West Papuan tribes. On the last day of the first congress, these 5,000 participants re-elected Wenda as chairman of ULMWP (United Liberation Movement for West Papua, [November 23, 2023; December 8, 2023](#)).

Freddy Warome, a resident of Port Vila, Vanuatu and the ULMWP's head of foreign mission, articulated his discontent with Tabuni's leadership while extending his congratulations to Wenda on being re-elected as chairman of the ULMWP. Warome then urged Tabuni to collaborate with Wenda and argued that Tabuni acted out of line with the ULMWP executive leadership in West Papua. Despite criticism from Warome, Tabuni conducted a follow-up press conference on November 27, 2023, to reiterate that Wenda's first congress was not affiliated with the ULMWP and further suspended the membership of both Wenda and Buchtar Tabuni in the organization.

Moreover, Tabuni banned Wenda from using the ULMWP name and conducted a ULMWP working group meeting in December 2023 in Bangkok, Thailand ([Tribun-papua.com](#), December 23, 2023). Consequently, Tabuni's chairmanship has since continued to exhibit a lack of unity, which is expected to last until the end of his term in 2028. Tabuni's rule is made more tenuous by Wenda's successful FRWP mobilizations ([United Liberation Movement for West Papua](#), July 10). Additionally, Tabuni will likely struggle to counter Wenda's diplomatic efforts, given Wenda's experience interacting with the MSG, U.K. Parliament, and EU Parliament.

Conclusion

Both Wenda and Tabuni believe that membership in the MSG is essential for ULMWP's end goal—West Papuan

independence achieved via a UN-backed referendum ([Southeast Asia Globe](#), October 17, 2013; [Jubi Papua](#), February 20, 2023). However, they disagreed on the path their movement should take toward a referendum. Although Tabuni claims that West Papua has no future as part of Indonesia, he believes in initiating a dialogue with Indonesia and rejects a military approach ([Jubi Papua](#), October 9, 2023). Tabuni also disagrees with Wenda's promotion of a West Papuan government-in-waiting in Oxford ([Tribun-medan.com](#), February 9, 2022). In contrast, Wenda believes in the importance of West Papua's government-in-waiting and states that he would only accept dialogue between West Papua and Indonesia if it were conducted under the supervision of the United Nations ([bennywenda.org](#), February 5). Therefore, it is likely that the dual powers and conflict among the leaders of ULMWP will persist, with Tabuni asserting his role as the executive president of ULMWP, while Wenda will continue as interim president of the West Papua government-in-waiting.

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