

Sri Lanka: Leader of Nation of Tawheed Jamaat Zahran Hashim alias 'Abu Ubaida'

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Easter Sunday is celebrated by Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, as the day on which the crucified Jesus Christ rose from the dead. It is a joyful day on which Christians sing jubilantly - Death, where is your sting? Grave, where is your victory? He's alive, He's alive, He is risen! In a cruel twist of fate, this year's Easter on April 21 turned out to be a day of tragedy and sorrow. The destruction and carnage caused on Easter Sunday by suicide bombers in Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa shocked, rocked and deeply saddened not only Christians but the entire Sri Lankan nation.

The international 'Jihadist' or Islamic militant movement known officially as Islamic State (IS) has claimed responsibility for the terror and horror of 'bloody' Easter in Sri Lanka. The IS, known earlier as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), aims at establishing a worldwide 'Caliphate' or a single Islamic government. IS' incumbent leader Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi is reportedly based in Syria. In 2014, the IS controlled extensive swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria. In recent times, the areas held by IS has shrunk greatly, thanks to the military defeats inflicted by the US-led coalition of forces.

While the IS adopted positional warfare to preserve territorial control in the Middle-East, it resorted to brutal terrorist attacks at another level on a worldwide basis. After its territorial hold began to diminish in Iraq and Syria due to military reversals, the IS began to intensify and accelerate terrorist attacks elsewhere. This was to demonstrate that the movement could not be crushed by the loss of territory and that it possessed a lethal, global reach. In order to carry out attacks in other parts of the world, the IS utilised militant Islamic organisations in those countries as agents by outsourcing deadly missions of violence to those entities. This is what seems to have happened in the case of Sri Lanka too.

The explosive attacks on three five-star hotels, two Catholic churches and a Protestant Evangelical church have drawn attention to a fiery Muslim preacher from Kattankudy in Batticaloa about whom very little was known outside of Islamic circles earlier. Nevertheless, he has been a person of interest for sometime to operatives of intelligence agencies, researchers, analysts and journalists monitoring the growth of Salafi Jihadism in South India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. Salafi Jihadism is a Wahabi influenced transnational Islamic ideology advocating armed struggle and a return to fundamental Islam. The Muslim demagogue who established a mosque in Kattankudy was perceived as the key figure in a suspected nexus between a local Muslim organisation and the IS. After the Easter violence, such suspicion has been further confirmed.

MOHAMMED ZHRAN MOHOMED HASHIM

In the wake of the terror attacks on Easter day, the spotlight focused on a 34-year-old politico-religious activist-preacher whose full name is Mohammed Zahran Mohomed Hashim. Known generally as Zahran Hashim, he was the founder of an Islamic organisation called National Tawheed

Jamaat (NTJ). Zahran is a powerful orator who has propagated the aims and objectives of NTJ in different areas of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu in India. Zahran Hashim ostensibly broke away from National Tawheed Jamaat with an extremist group of followers and set up a new outfit called Nation of Tawheed Jamaat in 2018. According to knowledgeable sources in both Sri Lanka and India, it is this group led by Zahran that had collaborated with IS in carrying out the Easter attacks in Sri Lanka.

It appears that Zahran Hashim split from his own National Tawheed Jamaat and formed Nation of Tawheed Jamaat with the primary objective of engaging in violence. While Tawheed Jamaat provided manpower, the Islamic State seems to have provided the input and technical expertise necessary for the explosive attacks. The blueprint for the well-coordinated attacks, aimed at shocking and awing Sri Lanka in particular and the world at large, seems to have been devised by IS strategic planners too. It is believed that Zahran Hashim was the linchpin in this lethal nexus between the Islamic State and Nation of Tawheed Jamaat.

Furthermore, Zahran seems to have adopted the IS nom de guerre 'Abu Ubaida' and participated in the attacks personally. It is suspected that Zahran Hashim alias 'Abu Ubaida' was one of the two suicide bombers who targeted Shangri-La Hotel at Galle Face. Others opine that if Zahran were indeed the ring leader, he would have opted to live and engage in more violence rather than die in a single explosive attack. Moreover, the family members of Zahran including his parents and three siblings have also gone 'missing' since April 18. Was this a protective measure to prevent anticipated reprisals on family members or a precursor to a family reunion in a safer environment? The question is dicey and no definite answer is possible at this juncture.

MURDEROUS TERRORIST 'ABU UBAIDA'

The key question however is why an Islamic fundamentalist preacher from the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka chose to align himself with the Islamic State and unleash terrible terrorist violence against innocent people engaged in worship at churches and equally innocent tourists and guests enjoying a sumptuous Easter breakfast at luxurious hotels. There are no easy answers at this point of time. What this column intends to do is to delve into the life of Zahran Hashim and try to piece together the story of how and why a peaceful religious activist transformed into a murderous terrorist called 'Abu Ubaida.'

Mohammed Zahran Mohamed Hashim was born in the Muslim coastal town of Kattankudy in 1985. Kattankudy pronounced in Tamil as 'Kaathaankudi' is situated 211 miles away from Colombo in the Eastern littoral known as 'Ezhuvaankarai' (shore of the rising sun) between the Batticaloa lagoon and the Bay of Bengal. It is a very small place with a land area of 2.56 sq. km. and 1.33 sq. km. of inland waterways. Kattankudy is reportedly the most densely populated town in Sri Lanka with 6,726 residents per square kilometre. The 2014 Census estimated the population in the Kattankudy urban council area as at 47,603.

The thickly populated Kattankudy is arguably the most prosperous Muslim town in the East. It is said that Kattankudy is the busiest business centre in the Batticaloa District. The first Muslim Central College in Sri Lanka was established in Kattankudy in 1930 thus paving the way for a commendable educational tradition. Kattankudy has produced many teachers, lawyers, accountants, engineers, academics and diplomats over the years. In addition, the natives of Kattankudy are well-known for their entrepreneurial skills and business acumen. A very large number of leading Muslim commercial establishments in the East as well as in several parts of the island belong to people from Kattankudy. There is also a blooming apparel industry. Kattankudy is reputed for sarees and sarongs.

MOSQUES INFLUENCED BY WAHABI IDEOLOGY

In recent times, many Kattankudy residents have sought employment in the Middle-East. This has resulted in increased Islamisation of the Wahabi variety. Wahabis are an orthodox Islamic sect originating in Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism is an ultra-conservative version of Islam that harks back to the past and rejects any religious innovation that came into being after the first three centuries of Islam. It seeks to purify Islam by practicing monotheistic worship and rejecting other deviant forms. Kattankudy today is a modern township bustling with women clad in Black Abayas and men sporting bristling beards. Date palms are grown within urban precincts and many signboards have Arabic lettering. Kattankudy has more than 60 registered and unregistered mosques. Except for a handful, most of them are in practice influenced by Wahabi ideology.

It must also be remembered that Kattankudy is the place where the LTTE in 1990 shot and killed people in four mosques while they were praying. 147 died in all. Kattankudy was affected badly in the 2004 tsunami too. 108 were killed and 93 reported missing. Some 2000 dwellings were destroyed or damaged.

It is in this Kattankudy milieu that Zahran Hashim was born in 1985 to Hayath Mohomed Hashim and Sameema Hashim. His family resided at the Ward 3 area in the town. He was the eldest of five children. Following Zahran were two brothers Zeyin and Rilwan. The youngest two were sisters Madaniya and Yaseera. All of Zahran's siblings are married with children. Zahran Hashim himself was married in 2010. His wife Haadiya is from Kekunagolla near Narammala in the Kurunegala District. She was a student at the Kekunagolla National School when the wedding took place. They have two children, a boy and a girl, aged eight and four respectively.

JAMIYYATHUL AL-FALAH MADRASSA

After obtaining primary and secondary education up to GCE O/L at a government school in Kattankudy, Zahran enrolled at the Jamiyyathul Al-Falah Madrassa (Theological College) in Ward 4 of Kattankudy in 2001. He was a very bright student but soon fell foul with his teachers due to his insolence and contrarian views. Young Zahran became very fluent in Arabic and was soon attracted to fundamental Islam and Tawheedism encapsulating the 'indivisible oneness concept of monotheism in Islam.'

Zahran Hashim became extremely rebellious at the Madrassa and argued vehemently with his teachers. He also refused to abide by norms and rules. As a result, he was expelled from Al-Falah Madrassa in 2007. Had he completed his full course of studies, Zahran would have become a 'Moulavi' or religious scholar/teacher. But he did not and therefore was officially denied such status. In later years, many of his followers addressed him as Zahran Moulavi and Hashim does not seem to have corrected them.

After being ejected from the Madrassa, Zahran Hashim attached himself to Sri Lanka Tawheed Jamaat. Tawheed, also spelled as Thawheed and Tawhid, denotes oneness with God. The Oxford dictionary of Islam states as follows: Tawhid is the defining doctrine of Islam. It declares absolute monotheism—the unity and uniqueness of God as creator and sustainer of the universe. Used by Islamic reformers and activists as an organising principle for human society and the basis of religious knowledge, history, metaphysics, aesthetics, and ethics, as well as social, economic, and world order. Jamaat on the other hand means assembly or congregation in Arabic.

TAMIL NADU TAWHEED JAMAAT (TNTJ)

There are different organisations in India and Sri Lanka calling themselves Tawheed Jamaat. In

India, there is the Tamil Nadu Tawheed Jamaat (TNTJ) which is closely associated with its Sri Lankan counterpart, Sri Lanka Tawheed Jamaat (SLTJ). Some members of Sri Lanka Tawheed Jamaat split from SLTJ due to its perceived subservience to the Tamil Nadu Tawheed Jamaat and formed Ceylon Tawheed Jamaat (CTJ).

Zahran Hashim initially worked with the SLTJ in Kattankudy after his Madrassa studies ended abruptly. But Zahran with his ultra-radical views was soon at loggerheads with SLTJ. He then struck out on his own and formed his own organisation called National Tawheed Jamaat (NJT). Neither SLTJ nor CNT in Sri Lanka had anything to do with Zahran Hashim's National Tawheed Jamaat. Although short of funds, Zahran set up a makeshift prayer centre at a wooden shed in Kattankudy and got down to work.

Hashim was a very powerful orator in Tamil and Arabic. He was forcefully effective in putting his viewpoint across. Soon Zahran Hashim became a popular figure in Kattankudy. Furthermore, he was invited by Muslim devotees in different parts of the island to conduct religious lectures. Zahran Hashim travelled to many districts in Sri Lanka to address Muslim congregations. It was during the course of such visits to the Northwestern Province that he met his wife Haadiyaa in Kekunagolla and married her.

NATIONAL TAWHEED JAMAAT MOSQUE

Zahran Hashim with his ultra-radical views and flowery speeches became a magnet for young people of both sexes. He opened a Tamil website for NJT and propagated his viewpoint. This attracted many in Tamil Nadu as well as those from Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu who were working in gulf countries. He later operated a Facebook account on the same lines. Soon donations began to pour in. The NJT Mosque was now housed in a modern building at New Kattankudy - Ward 3. Although Zahran's oratory was relished by many at meetings, not many participated in the prayers conducted at the National Tawheed Jamaat Mosque also known as 'Tharul Athar Athaviya.' This may have been due to the proliferation of different mosques in Kattankudy.

Although mosque attendance was poor, Zahran Hashim was able to draw large crowds for the outside meetings where he spoke. He would also walk around the town at times and hold wayside meetings at random. One incident that boosted his ego and enhanced his popularity was a public debate between Zahran and a Tamil-speaking Muslim scholar attached to the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo. The meeting held near the Aliyar junction in Kattankudy began at 3.00 p.m. and went on for 10 hours till 1.00 a.m. Although the academic was a well-read scholar, his command of the Tamil language was not very good. Zahran Hashim ran rings around his much-qualified, more knowledgeable opponent. It is said that the academic was no match for the wit, witticisms and repartees of Zahran Hashim. The audience of about 3000 applauded Zahran enthusiastically on that occasion. The membership in his NTJ swelled as a result.

Zahran Hashim also travelled around the country enrolling members for his National Tawheed Jamaat. It is said that NJT at one time had about 600 full-fledged members and 4,500 associate members. It is said that he travelled to Tamil Nadu, the Maldives and some Middle-Eastern countries to conduct meetings with expatriate workers from Sri Lanka and India. National Tawheed Jamaat (NTJ) began to grow in strength and influence. Still Zahran Hashim was virtually unknown outside segments of Muslim society in Sri Lanka and India. Zahran was however a 'pain in the neck' to many other mainstream Muslim organisations and their leaders on account of his 'radical populism.'

CREATION OF A 'CALIPHATE' (ISLAMIC STATE)

Even as NTJ began developing into a significant entity, Zahran Hashim's political thinking became

more and more extreme. He began sympathising openly with ISIL and ISIS. The turning point came in June 2014 when ISIS re-branded itself as Islamic State (IS) and announced the creation of a 'Caliphate' (Islamic State) erasing all State borders and making Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi the self-declared supreme leader of the world's estimated 1.5 billion Muslims. Thereafter, Zahran Hashim became an avid propagandist of IS in Tamil. He kept posting news items about IS battlefronts in Tamil and also wrote opinion pieces in support. Zahran Hashim was seen as the voice of IS in some Muslim circles.

Everything seemed hunky-dory for him but Zahran Hashim got into trouble by overreaching himself. To most Wahabi influenced Muslims in Kattankudy, the Baduriya Mosque at the Aliyar junction in Ward 6 is anathema. This is because Baduriya Mosque adheres more to mystical Islam known as 'Sufism' and adopts practices such as paying homage to saints and indulging in grave worship. Wahabis regard this as blasphemous and heretical.

So in an ill-advised bid to teach a lesson to Baduriya Mosque people, Zahran Hashim organised a National Tawheed Jamaat meeting at the Aliyar junction in close proximity to the mosque. When the meeting commenced on March 16, 2017, speaker after speaker made insulting references to Baduriya Mosque. The intention was to provoke Baduriya Mosque devotees. Zahran Hashim had brought clubs and swords clandestinely to the venue and kept them concealed on the stage. As expected, Baduriya Mosque devotees were provoked by the insults and retaliated by pelting stones at the stage. Zahran Hashim and his followers then set upon their rivals and attacked them with swords and clubs.

In the clash that ensued several persons on both sides were injured. Three sustained serious injuries and were hospitalised. The people of Kattankudy were incensed at the violence done in the name of religion. A protest demonstration organised by the Baduriya Mosque management opposite the Kattankudy Islamic museum was well attended. There was tremendous pressure on the police to take action. As a result, nine from NTJ Mosque and two from Baduriya Mosque were arrested and remanded for several months. These included Zahran's brother Zeyin. Zahran himself was wanted by the police. He chose to evade arrest by absconding. A story was spread in Kattankudy that Hashim had gone to the Maldives.

SOUTH INDIAN STATES OF TAMIL NADU AND KERALA

Zahran Hashim left Kattankudy and moved to the Northwestern Province from where his wife hailed. After spending some time in Sri Lanka, Zahran relocated to India where he began interacting with Muslim extremist groups in the South Indian States of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. He moved frequently without staying at one place for a lengthy period. His sojourns were mostly in the Malappuram District of Kerala and the Coimbatore, Trichy, Thirunelvely, Vellore, Nagapattinam, Kanniyakumari and Ramanathapuram Districts of Tamil Nadu. All these districts have sizeable Muslim populations.

Zahran spent a considerable period of time in the Ramanathapuram District. He is reported to have addressed meetings in Muslim villages like Azhagankulam, Sitharkottai, Athiyoothu, Puthuvalassai, Panaikkulam and the Muslim majority coastal town of Keezhakkarai. It is said that he openly advocated the IS cause in these places and canvassed for volunteers to join the fighting forces of IS. It is during this time that Zahran came to the attention of Indian intelligence services. It is also suspected that Zahran Hashim set up a smuggling link between Keezhakkarai on the Ramanathapuram coast in India and Kalpitiya in the Puttalam coast of Sri Lanka.

It was during his lengthy stay in India that Zahran Hashim underwent a transformation. From a radical activist propagating fundamental Islamic ideology and eulogising the Islamic State, Zahran Hashim turned into an exponent of armed militancy and practitioner of violence. In a remarkable

turnaround, Zahran Hashim resolved to return to Sri Lanka and engage in violence for what he thought was the cause of Islam.

DEADLY CAMPAIGN OF TERRORIST VIOLENCE

The story of how Zahran Hashim broke away from National Tawheed Jamaat movement he founded and formed a more extreme group called Nation of Tawheed Jamaat and embarked upon a deadly campaign of terrorist violence in tandem with the Islamic State will be related in detail in a forthcoming article.

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