

# Brief#28

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## **Zakir Musa: Death of Kashmir's Loneliest Militant**



Bibhu Prasad Routray

## Abstract

*Contrary to media headlines, Zakir Musa was not the 'most wanted militant' in Kashmir valley. With an aim to set up a caliphate, Musa led an immensely forgettable militancy, which had no stakeholders. His death, however, is a blow to the attempt by global jihadists to find a base in Kashmir.*

Sometime in 2012, a 23-year old young man from a well-off family in Noorpara village of south Kashmir's Pulwama district joined in Ram Dev Jindal college in Chandigarh to pursue a degree in civil engineering. Zakir Rashid Bhat alias Zakir Musa's father Abdul Rashid Bhat is a retired assistant executive engineer. However, within months Zakir Rashid Bhat alias Zakir Musa left the college, went back to Kashmir, and disappeared from home in 2013. He had joined the Hizb-ul Mujahideen (HM). The exact circumstances that led to his joining militancy are not known. That was, however, a period when relatively calm Kashmir valley was starting to boil. That was also a time in recent history when the local HM group, buoyed by a band of young and daring recruits, was becoming active, posing new challenges to the security forces. As a result, Jammu & Kashmir Home department data shows, 15 security forces were killed in 2012 and by 2013, the numbers had risen to 53.<sup>1</sup>

Musa worked closely with HM commander Burhan Muzaffar Wani, till the latter's death in July 2016. The HM's command then passed onto Musa's shoulders. However, a year later, in the summer of 2017, Musa released a video declaring his intention to establish a caliphate. He was critical of Pakistan as well as the separatists All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC). He threatened the latter of dire consequences who he thought were a hurdle in the establishment of caliphate. The HM leadership in Pakistan did not endorse his views. This paved the way for Musa parting ways with the HM and setting up the Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH), an affiliate of the al Qaeda.

In spite of the tag of global Jihad that the AGH claimed to have, Musa failed to provide it with any direction. Since AGH was opposed to Pakistan as well as the APHC, and had parted ways with the HM, it lacked sponsors, both inside in Kashmir and Pakistan. It was dubbed as an Indian agency by HM. Perhaps to shed that tag, in August 2017, Musa issued a 10-minute audio statement threatening to "liberate" India from the rule of "cow-worshipping" Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Hindus.<sup>2</sup>

The AGH carried out almost no attack targeting the security forces. The 'official' sanction of being an affiliate from the al Qaeda came a year after AGH's formal establishment, in July 2018.<sup>3</sup> But in view of al Qaeda central's weakened presence in the Af-Pak region and without much of ground level support for the AGH within Kashmir, that did not add any potency to the group. The group's total membership never crossed ten. All of them were young men from Tral sub-district, personally recruited by Musa. The outfit suffered a huge

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<sup>1</sup> "82 security personnel killed last year in Jammu and Kashmir, highest in 8 years: Home Department", *Economic Times*, 13 July 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/82-security-personnel-killed-last-year-in-jk-highest-in-8-years-home-department/articleshow/56855798.cms>. Accessed on 24 May 2019.

<sup>2</sup> "Zakir Musa: Will liberate India from cow-worshipping PM", *Times of India*, 1 September 2017, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/zakir-musa-will-liberate-india-from-cow-worshipping-pm/articleshow/60316692.cms>. Accessed on 24 September 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Abhinav Tripathi, "It's official: Al-Qaeda announces Kashmir unit, Zakir Musa is the leader", *Economic Times*, 14 July 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/its-official-al-qaeda-announces-kashmir-unit-zakir-musa-is-the-leader/articleshow/59790965.cms>. Accessed on 24 May 2019.

setback in December 2018, when six of its group members including the group's deputy chief Soliha alias Rehaan Khan were killed in an operation in Tral.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of odd graffiti painted overnight on the shutters of closed shops of Srinagar espousing the arrival of al Qaeda in Kashmir, the AGH was never considered an outfit to be taken seriously by the security forces. Zakir Musa remained perhaps the loneliest militant in the valley, fighting a directionless battle to set up a caliphate with almost no stakeholders. Perhaps that was the reason why he had a protracted shelf-life, surpassing two years, which is the average active tenure of a militant in the troubled valley.

On 23 May, as results of elections India's parliamentary elections were declared marking the re-election of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, Musa was cornered by the security forces in Dadsara village of Tral. According to Kashmiri media sources, he was visiting his home when forces cordoned off the area. Appeals for surrender by the security forces went unheeded. AGH supporters took to social media urging locals to mount attacks to aid his escape.<sup>5</sup> Musa, however, was killed in the encounter that lasted for few hours. The Indian Army's statement summed up the death and Musa's loneliness. The one-line statement read: "Op Dadasur (Pulwama). One terrorist killed. Terrorist identified as Zakir Musa. Weapons and warlike stores recovered. Operation over."<sup>6</sup>

Musa's dead body was handed over to his family by the security forces. As rains poured thousands came out to be a part of his last rites. In death, support for him had swelled, far beyond the number of cadres he had ever commanded. But that's atypical of any militant who gets killed in the valley, and represents the chronic alienation from India's mainland, and not so much support for the outfit that they belong to. Kashmir lost yet another young man to a cause that is hopelessly pitted against the strong-arm policies of the state. And with his death, the prospect of global Jihad taking roots in Kashmir had suffered a blow.

***(Bibhu Prasad Routray is a Director of Mantraya. This Special Report is published as part of Mantraya's ongoing "Mapping Terror and Insurgent Network" project. Mantraya Briefs are peer reviewed publications.)***

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<sup>4</sup> "Zakir Musa's Deputy Among 6 Militants Killed in Tral Encounter, 'War-Like' Stores Seized", *News 18*, 22 December 2018, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/six-militants-killed-as-encounter-breaks-out-in-jks-pulwama-1980641.html>. Accessed on 24 May 2019.

<sup>5</sup> "As AGH Leader Zakir Musa Reportedly Besieged by Security Forces, Supporters Call for Attacks to Aid His Escape", *SITE Intelligence Group*, 23 May 2019, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/as-agh-leader-zakir-musa-reportedly-besieged-by-security-forces-supporters-call-for-attacks-to-aid-his-escape.html>. Accessed on 24 May 2019.

<sup>6</sup> "Zakir Musa: Thousands mourn India's 'most wanted' militant", *BBC*, 24 May 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-48392851>. Accessed on 24 May 2019.

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