

The inside story of the 9 suicide bombers behind Sri Lanka's savage Easter attacks

By Meera Srinivasan of The Hindu



A devotee during a mass outside St. Sebastian's Church, after it was partially opened for the first time since the Easter Sunday attacks in Negombo on May 9, 2019.

Investigations throw up troubling hints of how readily rage can court terror

At first, they were nameless. "Nine suicide bombers," is all authorities would reveal. In a little over a week, the police identified each of them and their stories began coming out. Now, a month after Sri Lanka's savage Easter attacks, a messy web of disgruntled radicals has emerged, throwing up troubling hints of how readily rage can court terror.

Zahran Hashim, 33, radical preacher and alleged ringleader, found little acceptance in his hometown Kattankudy, in eastern Batticaloa. Mosques in the predominantly Muslim town rejected him outright. Their members even complained to authorities, before he went absconding in 2017 after a clash with a fellow priest who challenged his interpretation of Islam.

But soon, a team of young Muslim men — and one woman — from other, mostly Sinhala-majority, areas eagerly joined him on his Easter mission to carry out a suicide attack on churches and high-end hotels in and around Colombo and Batticaloa. All nine bombers were in their 20s and 30s.



A Sri Lankan soldier stands guard outside St. Lucia's Cathedral in Colombo. | Photo Credit: AP

Radicalised at different times, for different reasons, and in varying measure, they encountered Hashim on social media or in person. In him, they saw a mentor who could give their lives purpose and direction. With time and interaction, their shared “cause” acquired considerable weight — enough for them to pledge their lives for it.

Sri Lanka's Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and Terrorist Investigation Division (TID), leading the probe, have traced all nine to two jihadist organisations

— National Tawheed Jamaath (NTJ), led by Hashim, and Jamathei Millathu Ibrahim (JMI), a less formal group of youth who had met on social media.

Marred by internal power struggles, the two organisations gradually became less relevant for Hashim’s team as its focus shifted to a new mission in the last six months. Their disparate locations — in geography or class — did not matter. They were bound by ideology and connected by technology.

And on April 21, the nine bombers killed over 250 people, including 45 children, drawing attention to the underground terror network they had built quietly and efficiently, even as the rest of Sri Lanka was enjoying a relative post-civil war calm.

Millionaire brothers



The new mosque that’s under construction in Kattankudy. | Photo Credit: NYT

Uniformed soldiers and cops patrol the Dam Street-Old Moor Street junction in Pettah, Colombo’s busiest wholesale hub. A two-storeyed red building, with

'Ishana, 37' inscribed prominently, stands out in the packed row of shops, most of them painted white or green and selling rice, grocery, spice and tea. No. 37's shutters are down.

Ishana Exports is a nearly three decade-old spice export company. Its founder Y.M. Ibrahim is widely known as a millionaire with modest beginnings, and an ever-ready philanthropist. He has friends of all political hues, and they all respect him. In natural course, his sons would have inherited his business, fortune, and possibly all that goodwill. Instead, they chose to become suicide bombers. The CID has detained their father for questioning.

"An extremely mild-mannered and polite young man." That is how a senior staff member at Ishana Exports remembers his boss's son Inshaf Ahmed Mohamed Ibrahim. "Even as a child he was not mischievous. He was a lovely child," said a family member.

Inshaf, 33, went to the well-known D.S. Senanayake College in Cinnamon Gardens in the posh Colombo 7 locality. He didn't go to university but learned the tricks of the spice trade.

Of nine siblings, only Inshaf and Ilham — the second and third sons — were directly involved in the business. Both were on the board of directors. Inshaf was more actively engaged, said company sources. The two often travelled on work, including to India.

"Though he [Inshaf] was technically our boss, he never gave orders. He would say 'can you please do this', as if he were asking a favour," said an employee, who asked not to be named. Ilham, 31, on the other hand, doesn't seem to have evoked a similar warmth. "Ilham was a loner, he rarely showed up at family events or spoke to people. He was very introverted. We hardly even know him," said the family member.

It was not until a year ago that employees and family noticed a change in the two brothers.

Inshaf often objected to his father's practice of taking short-term loans on interest for rotating cash. "He said our religion does not permit borrowing money on interest and we must stop," a senior employee recalled. It's something Muslims often hear their preachers say, but their father — with a practical business sense — did not consider it an offence.

Techies on the bench

At least two arrests made after the attacks suggest that young IT professionals were among those associated with JMI.

Investigators say they suspect Aadhil Ameer, 24, a software engineer who might have provided technical and logistical support to the bombers, to have been a link between different jihadist units.

A Reuters report reveals that Ameer — who calls himself Aadhil Ax — has been under Indian surveillance from 2016, when he was found to be in touch with two suspects linked to a plot targeting Ahmedabad and with three Indians promoting the IS.

Ameer was from Dharga Town, near Aluthgama on the southern coast, where Muslims faced large-scale, targeted violence in 2012. As in Digana in 2018, the attacks seemed part of a pattern. It was repeated last week in parts of Kurunegala and Gampaha, when mobs torched Muslim-owned shops and homes.

Ameer is believed to have interned with IT company Virtusa in 2013, where one employee was recently arrested for suspected links with the Easter attacks. "We don't know if he played a role, but there are indications that this employee met Hashim on April 6," said a senior investigating officer.

"The sons were unwilling to compromise. They stepped down from the company's board last year," said the senior employee.

Inshaf continued to run a copper factory that he had set up some five years earlier, in Wellampitiya, 5 km from the family's plush villa in the Colombo suburb, Dematagoda. Ilham managed a part of the spice sourcing for his father's company.

Inshaf continued to visit the office, dealing with employees as cordially as before. A company source said there was no drastic change in Inshaf's appearance. "He only sported a slightly longer beard, I noticed. But many people do that." He wore formals or the usual jeans and T-shirt.

"He came last on April 18." That was four days before he blew himself up at Colombo's Cinnamon Grand Hotel, just as Ilham and mastermind Hashim did at the nearby Shangri-La hotel.

The same day, Ilham's pregnant wife Fathima blasted explosives strapped to her body as the police surrounded the Dematagoda house, where Ilham's family lived on the top floor. Their three children as well as three policemen died on the spot.

Investigators believe the brothers came in contact with Hashim via Facebook and private chat rooms. The bond seems to have grown over time, with Ilham becoming a key funder of the Easter plot, according to a top officer.

'Radicalised abroad'

The CCTV footage from Taj Samudra that Sri Lankan television played, showed a restless Abdul Latheef Jameel Mohamed seated at a restaurant, fiddling with his backpack. Minutes later, he walked out after a botched suicide attack. Without a clue of the terror he was carrying on his shoulders, staff helped him wheel out his bigger bags to the porch. Five hours later, he blew himself up in a small hotel in a southern suburb of Dehiwala, killing at least two other guests.

As a teenager, Jameel was a motivated student. He pursued aerospace engineering at Kingston University in southwest London from 2006 to 2007, and later went to Melbourne for postgraduation. Australian immigration records show that he left Australia in 2013.

Jameel's sister Samsul Hidaya told Daily Mail that he was "normal" when he went to study in Britain. "But after Australia, he returned to Sri Lanka a different man," she was quoted as saying. The Australian reported that the police had marked

Jameel for his apparent terrorist leanings, based on evidence linking him to IS recruiter Neil Prakash, one of Australia's most wanted jihadists.

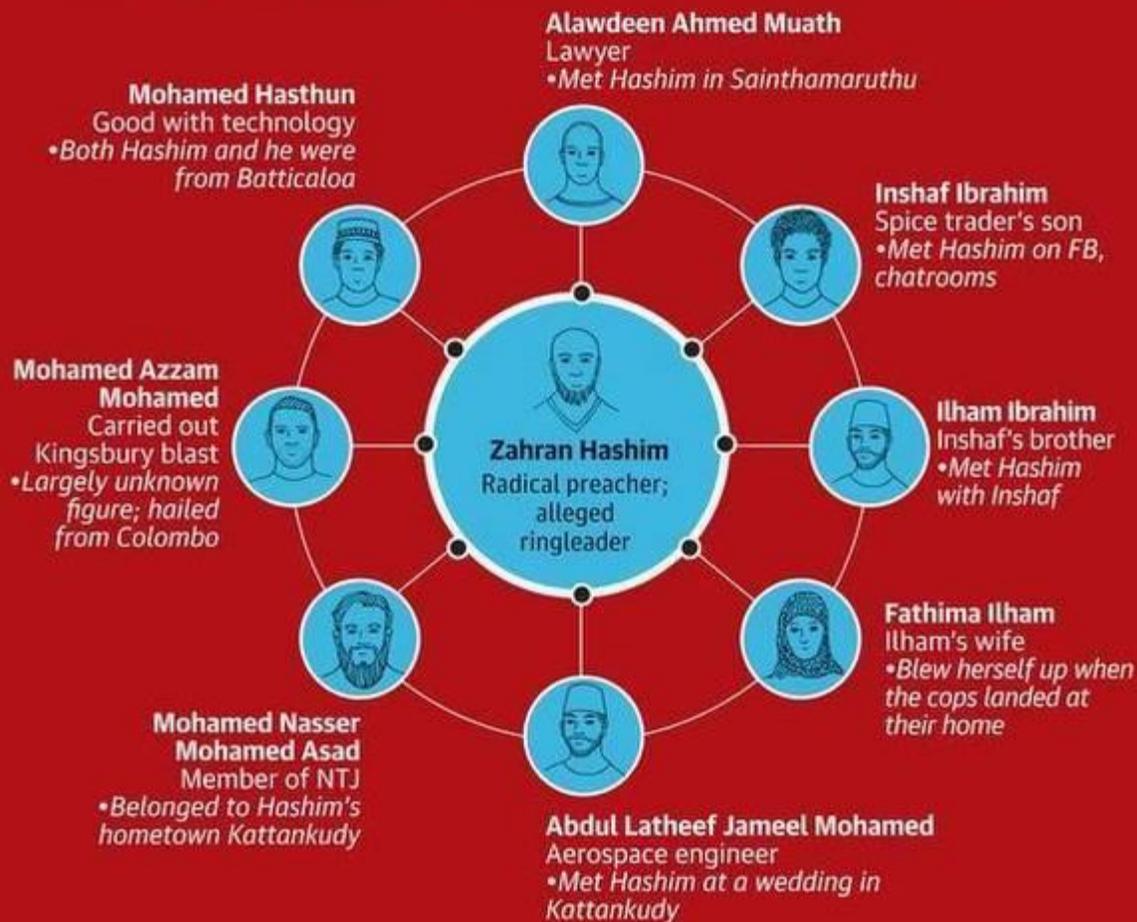
Others, however, believe Jameel was radicalised earlier, in the U.K., where he met notorious British Islamist Anjem Choudary. Jameel's friends also told media that the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 had deeply affected him when he was in his early 20s.

According to investigators, Jameel returned to Sri Lanka in 2014, after a failed attempt to travel to Syria. "He could go only up to Turkey," an officer said. Back home, he lived with his wife and four children in Wellampitiya, the Colombo suburb where Inshaf's copper factory is located.

"Jameel and the Ibrahim brothers knew each other well," said a senior investigator. "Initially, it was Ilham who linked up with Jameel online. Later, they were all part of JMI."

The Easter **network**

How eight individuals came together in a deadly plot masterminded by one man



Like Jameel, Alawdeen Ahmed Muath too was a motivated student. He graduated in law from a college in Colombo and was registered to practise. Following his wedding a year ago, Muath mostly lived in Sainthamaruthu, his wife's hometown in the Eastern Province. The town, less than an hour's drive from Kattankudy, where Hashim was based, came into focus when troops found 15 bodies inside a house on April 27. After an overnight gun battle between security forces and suspects, three suicide bombers triggered explosions, killing themselves, six children and three women inside.

Among the dead were Hashim's father and two brothers, including Rilwan Hashim, later identified by investigators as an "explosives expert". The jihadists were tenants on the first floor of a small house in a cramped tsunami resettlement colony. Muath, officers say, likely met the Hashims in Sainthamaruthu.

"Muath would visit us now and then. He last came [home] on April 14 to see his sister's newborn. His wife was pregnant, their baby was also due soon. Muath bought baby clothes and left for Sainthamaruthu," his father said in court.

On Easter morning, Muath's wife called the family to ask if they knew where he was. Then came news of the blast. On May 5, Muath's baby was born, a fortnight after the father took his life and that of many others, at St. Anthony's church in Colombo.

The precursor

Hashim's network was not restricted to the nine Easter bombers. Over the years, he had found allies and fans in different cities. For instance, the Abdul-Haq brothers in Mawanella, some 25 km from Kandy, who were on the run from December 2018. That's when Buddha statues in Mawanella, which is home to a sizeable Sinhala-Buddhist population, were vandalised. At least six people were arrested, but Mohammad Sadik Abdul-Haq and Mohammad Shaheed Abdul-Haq went into hiding. They were caught days after the Easter terror attacks.

Military intelligence sources said they have not found any evidence of the duo's role in the Easter bombings, but other investigators indicated that Sadik likely trained some of the bombers.

Irrespective of their role, their backstory gives a peek into how some crucial links in Sri Lanka's Islamist radical matrix go back years. Their story also reveals how raging anger can swiftly morph into a thirst for revenge, making an indoctrinator's job easy.

Hashim visited a mosque near Mawanella over eight years ago and, typically, made more enemies than friends before being barred from preaching there. "Hashim

would frequently argue that our preachers were wrong in their practice of Islam. After a point, they realised he was a trouble-maker and asked him not to come,” said an official at the Mawanella masjid.

The brothers grew up in Mawanella in a pious family. Their father Ibrahim Moulavi was a well-respected preacher and a member of the local Jamaat-e-Islami, an influential socio-religious organisation. Sadik failed his A Levels but was known for his karate skills. “He was very athletic,” the source said. Sadik and Shaheed met Hashim “once or twice” at that time, said a source close to the family.

Investigators can’t confirm these earlier meetings, but believe the brothers gravitated towards Hashim later, in 2017, enticed by his doctrinal videos. “From our investigation, it appears they got close in 2018, months before getting the statue vandalising assignment from Hashim,” a senior officer said.

Meanwhile, friends of the brothers were aware of their growing radicalism. In fact, the Jamaat-e-Islami and its youth wing, Sri Lanka Islamic Students’ Movement, expelled them four years ago. “Sadik went to Turkey on a scholarship and promised to return in three months but stayed on for over four months. We heard he went to Syria from there,” said one member.

On his return, Sadik tried usurping leadership of the organisation, and was expelled. He grew a long beard, his wife began to wear the face veil, not very common among Muslims in Mawanella. Shaheed too changed his attire. Their father tried bringing them back on track. “Instead, they tactfully drew Moulavi to their radical line,” said a relative. “The father had to be expelled from Jamaat-e-Islami less than a year ago. He challenged our constitution,” said a member.

Then, the defacing of the Buddha statues put them back in the spotlight. Friends and family members of the duo point to two likely triggers for the brothers’ growing slant towards radicalism.

Mawanella experienced a spate of violent anti-Muslim attacks in 2001 that shook the town. Fearing more losses to business and property, Muslims did not retaliate. Sadik and Shaheed were in their late teens at the time.

In 2018, Digana, located 40 km east of Mawanella, witnessed one of the worst targeted attacks on Muslims in years. Following a road rage incident, at least one Muslim youth died, and Muslim-owned property worth millions was burnt down.

“It must have impacted Sadik very much. Why Sadik, it affected all of us. I was very disturbed that these hardline groups were getting away with such deplorable actions,” says a young professional, in his early 30s, who knew the brothers from childhood. “We all felt the same rage. The only difference was in how we chose to express it — emotionally or rationally. Sadik was always emotional and aggressive, the kind whose hands would speak first even when someone violated traffic rules.”

A few others in Mawanella, Kattankudy and Colombo echoed similar sentiments. As much as they vehemently condemned the terror attacks, they seemed to appreciate why their friends or relatives had turned radical. “They say radicalism and terrorism have many roots. The feeling of injustice must surely be one,” said the young professional.

He recalled Hashim’s Facebook cover picture from late 2018. “I remember it said in Arabic ‘we are going to conspire against your statues’. It must have spoken directly to Sadik and Shaheed’s anger.” As it turned out, Hashim — who staunchly opposed idol worship — chose the brothers for the statue vandalism that investigators, in retrospect, see as an important precursor to the Easter attacks.

A wedding and an alliance

The many hazy links Hashim had with radical youth appear to have firmed up into an informal alliance in 2016, at a wedding. Investigators said: “It was at a wedding in Kattankudy. Many JMI members went for it. We think Ilham and Jameel were also there.” Beginning then, most in the group stayed in touch largely through WhatsApp and Telegram, even after Hashim went into hiding in 2017.

But the real “close circle,” investigators said, was formed mid-2018, with no specific mission but probably as “some sort of preparation” for a future attack. Investigators point to the clue they saw in the huge cache of explosives unearthed in January in Wanathawilluwa town, near Wilpattu national park.

The Easter plot itself seems to have come to shape much later. “From our interrogation of suspects, it is evident that Hashim spoke of attacking churches,” said a senior officer. He thinks the plot was provoked by the Christchurch killings in New Zealand in which over 50 Muslims, kneeling in prayer, were shot dead.

Others are less certain. “The Christchurch attack was mid-March. A well-coordinated, sophisticated attack of this nature will need meticulous planning and longer preparation time,” said a senior officer. “There is little evidence to support that theory.”

“In fact, one of the main questions that remains is whether the suspects had a direct channel to the IS leadership,” he said. Evidence shows that some suspects, including Jameel and Hashim’s brother Rilwan, were in touch with two of the five main Sri Lankan IS fighters who went to Syria some years ago. But none of the bombers had direct links with the IS leadership.

One of the Sri Lankan jihadists that Rilwan had been speaking to died in 2017; and another, whom Jameel knew, is in custody, reportedly in Turkey. “They were two of the first five fighters who left from 2015 to Turkey and Syria. They left with their entire families. That is how politicians came up with that number,” he said, referring to the “over 30 Sri Lankan youth” who, politicians say, joined the IS.

It is unclear if Hashim was independently in touch with the IS leadership. He often claimed to have received instructions from “Sham,” referring to Syria, in his videos and conversations with recruits.

Investigators are also grappling with another contradiction — the target. Why did the Islamist radicals choose to attack a fellow minority community with whom they had no enmity?

In the raid in Sainthamaruthu, troops not only found explosives, but also white dresses that Buddhist women usually wear for temple visits or prayers. This has sparked doubts of whether the attacks were planned for the Buddhist festival of Vesak — May 18-19 — or for the July Kandy Perahara, known for its procession of

traditional dancers and parades of elephants. Every year, tens of thousands of people are on Kandy's streets to witness this spectacle.

Some investigators wondered if an initial plot, planned against Sinhala-Buddhists, had been hijacked by an "external element" at a later stage. In other words, did an individual or group abroad use an already activated local radical group to put out its own message to the Western world? There are no clear answers yet.

It also looks as if JMI members initially hoped to join the IS in Syria. But after the 'fall' of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, they had to put off the plan, an official source said. "Ever since, Ilham was desperate to execute an attack in Sri Lanka. He found his answer in the Easter plot."

His brother Inshaf appears to have been roped in at the last stage. He had flight tickets booked for himself and his family for Mecca this May.

"It was only weeks before the Easter weekend that they evolved into a proper team, with their specific roles charted out. In the final weeks, they communicated using 'Threema', an encrypted messenger service considered highly secure, according to an officer.

Now, after extensive searches and key arrests, officers are confident of having virtually eliminated the threat. However, investigators continue to connect the dots — old and new — to deconstruct the deadly operation. "Gaps remain," a senior officer admitted.

Further probes will reveal if the plot was accelerated after Christchurch or if the target shifted at some point, but what is clear is that the suicide bombers had harboured enough rage in recent years to willingly embrace terror and execute a ruthless act. After that, the date, venue and target were merely details.

(Most of the sources requested anonymity as the case is under investigation.)