

# At the Age of 31, Ferguson Activist Bassem Masri Reportedly Died of a Heart Attack. Why?

By

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Bassem Masri, a Palestinian-American civil rights activist best known for his participation in and live-streaming of the Ferguson Uprising in 2014, died Tuesday morning after being found unresponsive on a bus, officials say. While the cause of death still hasn't been confirmed, at least one outlet is reporting that Masri died of a heart attack.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reports there was “nothing suspicious and no trauma to Masri” when he was found, citing the St. Louis County medical examiner's office. The St. Louis American is reporting that the 31-year-old activist died of a massive heart attack. Masri was on a bus headed to Bridgeton, a suburb in Northwestern St. Louis County, according to the Post-Dispatch. Before Masri was taken to the hospital, someone attempted to perform CPR on him. He was later pronounced dead.

As activist Umar Lee wrote for the St. Louis American, Masri's family came to St. Louis in the 1980s, where his father, Zuhdi Masri, ran the Yeatman Market corner store in North St. Louis.

“While many business owners were satisfied with making money off the black community and not reinvesting, Zuhdi donated tirelessly to the community and became very politically engaged,” Lee writes. “It was in this environment that Bassem AKA Lil’ Zuhdi grew up.”

As many who knew and worked alongside him have noted, Masri was uncompromising and steadfast in his anti-racist activism, focusing specifically on police brutality. During the protests that erupted following Michael’s Brown shooting death at the hands of former officer Darren Wilson, Masri live-streamed the demonstrations in large part because he didn’t trust the mainstream media to accurately report on the protests, Mic writes:

“I can’t rely on them,” Masri said of the mainstream media in a 2014 video clip [retweeted] by St. Louis, Missouri, activist Kayla Reed on Wednesday. “They ain’t gonna say the truth. They ain’t gonna never say the truth. They got their own narrative.”

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Baah  

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Rest in Power [#Bassem](#). This is from the first days of the [#Ferguson](#) uprising, when Bassem was live-streaming. He is the reason many of us learned about [#Ferguson](#). He grounded us in awareness of our shared struggle with [#Palestine](#). We lost a real one today.



12:06 AM · Nov 28, 2018



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While Masri's early death is heartbreaking, the circumstances surrounding it—that is to say, the sudden and violent deaths of other Ferguson activists—have aroused suspicions.

Three other Ferguson activists have died since the 2014 protests, including Edward Crawford and DeAndre Joshua. Crawford's death was ruled a suicide, while Joshua died in 2014 much like fellow activist Darren Seals, who in 2016 was found dead in a burning car, six gunshot wounds riddling his body. Their murders are still unsolved.

More recently, activist Melissa McKinnies' son, Danye Jones, was found hanging from a tree in her backyard. While police are investigating Jones' death as a suicide, McKinnies says her son was lynched.

As some have pointed out on social media, it's impossible to detangle the circumstances surrounding Michael Brown's death—deep socioeconomic inequality, and a long history of a police force and legal system that targets and exploits black residents and black neighborhoods in St. Louis County—from these activists' deaths. As Wesley Lowery, a Washington Post reporter who covered the Ferguson Uprising, wrote on Twitter, “I don't discount the possibility of foul play in some of these, but deaths of well-known Ferguson activists every few months underscores two realities: the protests were led by poor black and brown people. In America, poor black and brown people die young.”

St. Louis County is deeply segregated, its neighborhoods carved up by decades of racist redlining policies and discrimination against black homeowners, which have continued to manifest in the present day. Back in 2015, the Department of Justice found that Ferguson's police department disproportionately targeted black people for stops and citations, essentially leaching fines from black residents and cycling them into a labyrinthine municipal system that often led to re-arrests if fees went unpaid or court dates were missed. The region's cash bail system also kept many people in jail simply for the crime of being poor.

Violence and homicide rates have also surged in the County in recent years, with police officers saying they can't do much to address the "personal feuds" they consider to be the source of the problem.

And if all that weren't enough, the region has been hit particularly hard by the opioid crisis, though certainly substance abuse had been an issue before (Lee wrote that Masri had battled addiction but was clean at the time of his death).

What results is a toxic pressure cooker—one that, as the New York Times reported earlier this year, activists can be particularly vulnerable to. Focusing on the life and sudden death of Erica Garner, writer John Eligon notes that activists labor under intense duress: "Along with the long hours, constant confrontation and frequent heartbreak they experience, activists work for little or no pay and sometimes struggle for basic needs like food and shelter even as they push for societal change."

Whether Masri's death is ruled "natural" or not, it will still be connected to the deaths of other Ferguson activists, and to the greater—and unchanging—narrative of these United States: a land where the twin evils of poverty and inequality have made it possible for black and brown people to be chopped down, time and time again, impossibly young and full of promise.