

# Terror Strikes in Sri Lanka: A Sign of Weaponisation of Ideology

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## Abstract

*Radical ideology is the driving force behind the transnational terrorism. The attack in Sri Lanka has proved that ideology can become a potent weapon to perpetrate the acts of terrorism on unsuspecting innocent civilians. The outcome of such terror attack is neither a decisive victory nor a tangible change in behaviour of the government under coercion or threat of more terror attacks. However, there is a perception in the minds of terrorists that they are committing such acts of terror as part of their duty to the religion for fulfilment of larger objective of establishment of Caliphate. In most cases, self radicalised terrorists are using every day utility technology and objects such as vehicles, locally assembled drones and even fertiliser as explosive. Battle of narrative is as important as battle with guns to defeat the idea of Jihad. This is not a war of one nation; it is a collective war of the global community. It would require kinetic and non-kinetic measures to defeat this threat.*

## Introduction

The character of transnational terrorism and grey zone conflict is ever evolving and has created war between the people on the basis of religion, ethnicity and nationalities. The terror attacks in Sri Lanka are influenced by transnational terrorism where ideology of terrorism has been imbibed from the Islamic State (IS) but it is perpetrated by homegrown terrorists and directed against people of the host nation. It is a case of domestic act of terrorism where the perpetrators, victims, and audience hail from the venue country<sup>1</sup>. But there is flipside to the terror strike where ideology is

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from transnational terror organisation but victims and perpetrators are from Sri Lanka. In fact there is no history of Islamic terrorism in Sri Lanka nor an overt confrontation between the Muslim and Christian community, yet Christians were targeted on the Easter. In spite of Sri Lanka being low threat nation from the point of view of Islamic terrorism, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) operatives (most of them self radicalised) chose to target people during religious function to register their presence in Sri Lanka. Is it an indication of impending inexorable religious war in South Asia? Is Sri Lanka being used as a maritime pivot or is it an attack to maintain unpredictability? It is difficult to find answers at this stage, however, the philosophy ISIS and Al Qaeda maintains is “exploit every unguarded approach and target disbeliever whether he is a civilian or military, whether that country is in collusion with the West or not, for they have the same ruling. Both of them are disbelievers”.<sup>2</sup> Defensively, the key point is that terrorists go where they see the opportunities, thus undermining distinctions between high- and low-threat areas.<sup>3</sup>

The attack in Sri Lanka that killed more than 200 civilians, while praying on Easter, appears to be a case of weaponisation of ideology for larger objectives of IS to proliferate the idea of Caliphate by sensational act of terror. The message is clear, that no geographical barrier or counter terror forces can stop a terror organisation to penetrate from unexpected quarters and create a situation of war between the people in their own streets. The battle space is now urban cities, population centres, religious places, and even historical sites. The battle space also extends to cyber and cognitive domain to weaponise ideology by creating a narrative that dilutes idea of states and reshape public perceptions. The grey zone is now cluttered by transnational terrorists, drug cartels, criminal gangs, religious radicals, and politically disaffected subjects of the states.

Since August 2014, ISIS had chosen to fight frontal battles with security forces and supportive militia. This trend continued up to March 2019 when it lost its last bastion in Syria. It is unthinkable that the core ISIS leadership was not working on a strategy for its post-Caliphate phase, like the al Qaeda did after 9/11 anticipating the US-led response.<sup>4</sup> IS ideologues are conscious that if they have to keep this movement alive, they have no option but to take the idea of Jihad for Caliphate to every part of the world where

Muslims reside. Therefore, every country that has footprints of radical ideology of Jihad must be prepared to face the emerging threat of terror through local proxies. It is difficult for the counter terrorist forces to identify or stop local proxies if they show no signature of overt presence of armed and even unarmed radicalised gangs. It is not possible to stop a man using his personal car to drive into public gathering and killing unsuspecting congregation. The new trend is that the terror organisations are not using sophisticated weapons, but technology and material of daily use easily available in the market for common usage by public. States must keep in view that there are three most potent weapons that are used by transnational terror organisations; information, demonstration of reach and capabilities, and access to financial support. The attack in Sri Lanka was no different, the terror organisations had information of targets, access to the material for Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and unobstructed access to reach the desired targets without being intercepted by security forces and access to the money to support operations.

### **Future Trends**

The attack in Sri Lanka has demonstrated that transnational terrorism is going to be increasingly diffused, diverse, dispersed and disruptive. Such a strategy will ensure that they remain amorphous, faceless, invisible, and unpredictable. The objective is to demonstrate that institutions of governance are helpless and incapable of fighting them and will endeavour to create a perception of invincibility. They try to demonstrate honour and glory on a narrative spread by radicals, of "Dying to Win". Transnational terror organisations create a narrative, of people fighting a just war with the state and attempt to create an impression of blurring the lines between peace and wartime. Post disabling of the Caliphate in Syria and Iraq, the goal has been to stay below the threshold of triggering a full armed struggle by employing mostly noncombat tools, often backed by ideologues to achieve political objectives<sup>5</sup> for establishment of Caliphate.

Use of disruptive and lethal technologies and weapons will become a routine and mass drone attack on Russian bases in Syria is a curtain raiser of what is coming next. Though terrorists did not use high technology weapons in Sri Lanka, but the same cannot be overruled in future especially, when useable technology

is available for making IEDs, assembled drones or cyber as weapon to disorient or disrupt air traffic, jamming of police and security forces net and fake fire alarms. Even triggering fire in crowded complexes / industrial hubs can cause massive collateral damage. This is further aided by violation of rules for illegal construction and running of illegal institutions and factories.

The strategy is that modules remain incognito by concealing their identity and maintaining complete isolation from other affiliates by design. The Sri Lankan suicide bombers maintained secrecy and ensured their intent was concealed till they executed the task. Though some intelligence agencies, including India, had warned Sri Lankan government but it was not acted upon probably thinking that Sri Lanka will not be targeted by IS affiliates since it has no history of Islamic terror. These affiliates defy conventions and selection of hit men is carefully done so that they do not reveal intent by actions or expressions. In the case of Sri Lanka, the nine suicide bombers did not buckle under fear or emotion of losing their lives and dear ones. They showed normal behaviour till they blew themselves up. It indicates that some amount of psychological mentoring and selection of bombers would have gone into.

The terror organisations are exploiting ideas and different identities to further their cause. The unique concept they have developed is to penetrate through interconnected world to reach their potential cadres and through this network create ideological and identity fissures to wage Jihad. Al Qaeda and ISIS have exploited 'World Wide Web' to the extent that no organisation has ever done. They have used it to recruit cadres, align ideologies with local proxies and even execute operations on social media to conceal intent and identities. The terrorist organisations have effectively used connectivity to disengage with the state and its institutions. It is a concept that needs to be carefully examined and analysed. It is bound to have profound impact on national security.

War from afar<sup>6</sup>, by state and non-state actors, will continue to develop with greater capacity for stand-off and remote attacks. The difference is that a state uses both kinetic and non-kinetic means for 'war from afar' whereas, non-state actors rely on exploiting ideas as weapon. The group that struck the World Trade Centre, for example, did not exist until its members, foreigners of

diverse nationalities, coalesced in New York for that one attack. That they belonged to no terrorist group when they entered the United States, underscores how the mere movement of highly discontented people can bring about the malignant combination of collaborators, and target, despite a very elaborate security set up.<sup>7</sup> It was the idea of Jihad that brought them together and they planned and executed one of the biggest terror attack in the history of mankind. In a survey by The New York Times, the overall loss was approximately \$3.3 trillion, or about \$7 million for every dollar Al Qaeda spent planning and executing the attacks.<sup>8</sup> Attack on World Trade Centre demonstrated that there is no need for weapons of mass destruction to cause unprecedented collateral damage. It required discontented and motivated cadres prepared to die for Jihad. These ideologically mentored terrorists cannot be disabled or disarmed by counter terrorist forces because they use mind as the weapon. Thus, such threats can be disabled by a narrative and digital intelligence that can assist in decoding and disengaging them from the idea of Jihad.

### **Lessons for India for Calibrated Response**

The counter terrorist forces are not suitable to fight the transnational terror organisations, especially those who weaponise ideology, because they remain amorphous and faceless till they unleash acts of terror. Therefore, important aspect is to harden the accessibility to the targets, including public places, by putting in place structural, digital, cyber and human security. There is a need to create an environment that, “you are being watched in public and in private”. The terrorists will ‘leave no access point unexploited’ and thus, misuse of technology by terrorists will be more frequent than before. There is a growing consensus among the counter terrorist analysts that governments can no longer rely on countering terror threats with traditional security mechanisms. It is near impossible to develop counter terrorist strategies purely based on human skills and instinct, thus investment in technology to deal with emerging threats from terrorism is a necessity.

**Technological Wall and Technological Spear: The Future Weapon to Fight Terrorism.** There is a need to formalise the capabilities and legal framework to use technology to counter transnational terrorism and violent extremism. It will require incorporation and adaptation of technology to build capabilities of

detection, prevention, pre-emption and elimination of terrorists through multi-layered technological wall and technological spear. What is important is, employment of combination of technology in synergy with human intelligence and counter terrorist forces. Some of the important measures that need to be put in place are digital mapping of population, cyber intelligence, surveillance of suspects, monitoring of funding, sale purchase of crypto currency, browsing and distribution of radical literature on social media and forming of social groups based on radicalism. Thus, there is a need to map entire population for facial recognition for easy monitoring. There is a growing perception that even Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) mapping is required today because facial and finger prints can be altered by surgery but DNA cannot be altered. As a system, every child born must be sampled so that digital and DNA mapping of population data can be stored. The caveat is to maintain security of personal data to prevent misuse by unscrupulous organisations and individuals. UK, China and many European countries are slowly achieving digital and DNA mapping to ensure criminals, terrorists and absconding outlaws can be pinned as soon as they expose to the CCTV cameras and in case of doubt their DNA can be matched.

**Demystify Web of Uncertainty.** Creation of haze and uncertainty is a character of transnational terrorism and grey zone conflict. Success of state lies in finding clarity in the web of fog created by transnational terrorists and their local proxies. This web can be broken by incorporating technology and calibration of human efforts. Through penetration into the unarmed terrorist's network, who are working overtly as preachers of peace in society or as professionals employed in public or private sector as common citizens, India needs to build a data of all suspects within the country and outside as is being maintained by Morocco, the US and some European nations. In fact, Morocco not only provided lead to Sri Lanka but also provided inputs to India to prevent any further attacks. As per Moroccan intelligence agencies, terrorists were planning to launch second wave of attack after Easter bombing which was averted due to timely input. An Islamic country like Morocco dismantled "183 terrorist cells" in the country that were in various stages of planning of terror attacks, 361 devastating terrorist projects were neutralised by Moroccan intelligence agencies. More than 3,000 people, including 292 individuals with previous criminal record,



were arrested by Moroccan authorities.<sup>9</sup> Such inputs can only be obtained when there is deeper penetration of intelligence agencies into terror organisations, radical organisations and carefully chosen undercover agents, posing as modules on the social media as well as on the ground, keep the terror modules and their inner network under surveillance.

**Home First Approach.** To prevent any terror attack, 'home first' approach to security is must. Therefore, it requires uninterrupted intelligence, surveillance and counter terror combat forces to work in tandem. The efficiency of counter terrorism intelligence and force lies in preempting and preventing terror attacks by proactive intelligence and timely neutralisation of suspects. What happens behind the four walls of religious places also needs to be monitored and if any religious place or social organisation is indulging in radicalisation and recruitment, such organisations, without bias, should be banned and culprits be brought to book. In addition, critical targets must be hardened to deny exposed flanks.

**Law as a Tool of Deterrence.** A nation with archaic laws cannot deter armed and unarmed terrorists and their ideologues. Thus, law must be used as a weapon to deal with proxies of transnational terror and hardliners. India needs to enact a law to punish those who indulge in terrorism in a foreign country and then return to lead a normal life. Similarly, legal framework needs to be strengthened to bring to book unarmed terrorists and those who radicalise youths to join terror groups.

**Think Ahead to Remain Ahead of Terrorists.** Intelligence agencies cannot sit back and remain satisfied by past success. They must continue to work to decode what can happen in future. Did anyone ever believe that terrorists will take charge of the aircraft in flight and bring down World Trade Centre, or mount an attack through sea in the case of 26/11 Mumbai or carry out suicide attacks on the occasion of Easter in Sri Lanka? Therefore, there should be a continuous research or thinking as to what can they do next and intelligence agencies should then start looking at new leads to neutralise further attacks. In addition, in fact not only intelligence agencies or police should be working to defeat terrorists but every government department from public health and safety to municipal conservancy should feed inputs to the centralised agencies so that these activities can be analysed and collated and that no signature goes unnoticed.

**Over-reaction is a Dangerous Phenomenon.** Over-reaction is a dangerous phenomenon and it can create antagonism in the society. Media also needs to be careful and not hype issues related to fear and apprehension of people on the basis of rumours and fake news. Over-reaction can lead to societal tension and further alienation of population. Counter terrorist forces, government agencies and media must maintain balance and avoid any over reaction. Post Sri Lanka terror strike, the political leaders did not speak in different languages and entire nation, including media, was on the same page and reading from the same script. Whereas in India, media trial and cooking up of narrative often takes place leading to politicisation of and polarisation of terrorism. It has become a routine for political parties and so called human right activists to question counter terrorist operations and their veracity. Under such circumstances, at times culprits can get away and innocent may be victimised.

### **Conclusion**

Patrick J Kennedy had said, "Terrorism is a psychological warfare. Terrorists try to manipulate us and change our behaviour by creating fear, uncertainty, and division in society". Anwar al-Awlaki, the Al Qaeda leader, in one of his lectures had said that war for establishment of Islamic Caliphate is "the Battle of Hearts and Minds".<sup>10</sup> Al-Awlaki during his discourse had sent message to Jihadists across the globe, "don't rush to Iraq and Afghanistan, stay back in your own country and wait for the opportunity". There is a need to understand that the IS has been disabled but not destroyed. As a result, the threat from IS has increased manifold after the collapse of the Caliphate, especially from returning cadres from Syria, Iraq and those who stayed back on the advice of Anwar al-Awlaki.

If counterterrorist activities are to go global, it will require a broad outlook in planning kinetic and non-kinetic measures against terrorism. It will also mean enlisting cooperation of foreign partners in going after terrorists offensively.<sup>11</sup> The syndrome "it is your war" must end. It is a common threat to modern states and societies and needs to be dealt as "our war". It will require collaborative security mechanism to make participating nations stakeholders with definite commitment to the cause. There is also a need to isolate nations supporting acts of terror by implementation of



instruments, such as Financial Action Task Force, for money laundering and funding of terrorism. The Security Council stresses that capacity-building in all member states is a core element of the global counter-terrorism efforts.<sup>12</sup> Technology is a vital tool to deal with transnational terrorism and must be optimally utilised to make streets and states safe and secure.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Todd Sandler, Terrorism and Counterterrorism an Overview, Oxford Economic Papers, 04 November 2014.

<sup>2</sup> David Kirkpatrick, "Attacks in West Raise New Fears Over ISIS' Influence," New York Times, 24 October 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Paul R. Pillar, Terrorism Goes Global: Extremist Groups Extend Their Reach Worldwide, Brookings, 01 September 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Terror through local Proxies is part of ISIS evolving modus Operandi, May 01, 2019. Accessed from <http://www.eyesrilanka.com/2019/05/01/terror-through-local-proxies-is-part-of-isis-evolving-modus-operandi/> on 01 June 2019.

<sup>5</sup> A Report in Global Trends, Paradox of Progress, Accessed from <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/key-global-trends/how-people-fight> on 01 June 2019.

<sup>6</sup> A report in Global Trends, Trends Transforming the Global landscape, Accessed from <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/global-trends/trends-transforming-the-global-landscape> on 02 June 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Pillar, N 3.

<sup>8</sup> Shan Carter & Amanda Cox, 9/11 Tally \$3.3 Trillion, New York Times, 08 September 2011

<sup>9</sup> Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, India, Morocco prevent further terror strikes in Sri Lanka, The Economic Times, 03 May 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Shane, "The Enduring Influence of Anwar al-Awlaki in the Age of the IS", Combating Terrorism Centre, July 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Pillar, N 3.

<sup>12</sup> A Report on Meeting of Security Council, Highlighting Changing Nature, Character of Scourge of Terrorism, Says Can Be Defeated Only by Sustained, Global Approach, in Presidential Statement, United nations, 04 May 2012.