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Five lessons from the Jihadi Easter attacks in Sri Lank

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Ten years after the civil war, Sri Lanka had recovered the sense of normality most of us take for granted in the West. No special controls regarding explosives and weapons, no special surveillance on potentially violent groups. When the first blasts of the present infamous attack were heard, those present thought to be facing a natural disaster or accident. And yet the Sunday Easter's Jihadi outbreak was one of the most deadly terrorist attacks in South Asia. What happened? Was this specific to Sri Lanka? What are the lessons we can draw at a global level? Here we suggest five main lessons from the events.

1. The global nature of the Jihadi movement

Sri Lanka's political leadership and investigating bodies were under fire immediately after the attacks as they were unable to act preventively in spite of the multiple warnings they received. Yet apart from other responsibilities, the major reason the attack took the security establishment by surprise was the fact it did not fit the pattern of gradually growing level of violence and sophistication the country had witnessed with the Tamil Tigers (LTTE).

LTTE started its actions in the seventies through targeted assassinations and only slowly progressed towards the savagery and technical sophistication which allowed them to develop not only a territorial basis but also a navy, and even kamikaze airplanes in 2009. By contrast, other than [vandalising Buddhist statues in December last year](#), the group responsible for the coordinated and sophisticated Easter attack had no confirmed established violent precedents within Sri Lankan territory.

The wave of terror which followed the Charlie Hebdo attack of January 2015 also surprised European authorities in the level of savagery and technical sophistication of the operations involved. Although

the signs pointing to a strong likelihood of a terror act against Charlie Hebdo were only too apparent, French authorities could not foresee the intensity level of the threat.

The Sri Lanka terrorist attack confirms that national authorities around the world cannot take for granted the need of a ‘terror learning process’ indoors.

2. The importance of fanatic indoctrination

As was the case in previous Jihadist attacks, there has sometimes been some confusion regarding the responsibilities involved. Thus pre-existing divisions or tensions in an area or country are sometimes held to be the cause behind an attack, rather than the attack perpetrators being understood to manipulate pre-existing divisions or tensions ([New York Times approach is a good example](#)).

There is nothing really new in this narrative - which has been repeated in similar circumstances ad-nauseum. The blame is put on Zionism, colonialism, social or ethnic grievances, sometimes islamophobia.

The most hard-core attackers were the Ibrahim family - a millionaire, well-connected family; a family which, according to a [BBC report](#), was most likely indoctrinated by Abdul Latheef Mohamed Jameel, a former student in the United Kingdom and Australia and also member of a local wealthy family.

Still according to the same source, Mr Jameel went to Turkey trying to join jihadi forces in Syria, but there is no evidence he managed to do so. He himself seems to have been indoctrinated in London by Anjem Choudary, a jihadi preacher whose doctrine is known to be extremely religiously supremacist. If this is confirmed, we might now have reached a situation wherein someone passing through a European capital with very lax rules on violent indoctrination may prove to be more dangerous than someone coming out of a Jihadi war theatre.

Whereas Jihadism, as any other fanatic ideology, tends to nurture on real human grievances, the Easter attacks seem to show how secondary these grievances may be in comparison with the lethal weight of the ideology.

Otherwise, contrarily to cases such as the European terror attacks, wherein the experience obtained in the war scenarios of Iraq and Syria seemed to have played a key role, there is as yet no concluding sign that any of the key terrorists engaged in the Easter attack had any previous experience with war.

The Easter attacks demonstrate the crucial role played by the Jihadi ideology – much more important than any other factor responsible for the attacks.

3. Anti-money laundering measures

Taking into account the fortune of the Ibrahim family and its apparently wholehearted commitment to Jihad, one can easily understand how the attackers were financed and why. In this specific case, anti-money laundering measures could not stop the attack.

However, if we consider the importance of Osama bin Laden's capacity to mobilise his family's vast funds for the Jihadi movement, we can spot here a radically different situation. The Sri Lankan families' financial basis did not allow for the financing of a global Jihad.

Anti-money laundering measures cannot prevent a locally-financed terror attack, but it seems clear they can make it difficult for a personal fortune to be converted into a financial basis for 'global Jihad'.

We think, therefore, that these attacks reveal anti-money laundering measures to be very effective in preventing the financing of a global Jihad.

4. The war against crusaders

Whereas public opinion was quick to find acceptable grievances for the attack ([one of the earliest explanations was a revenge for the Christchurch attacks](#)), Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi declaration is unambiguous on presenting it as the answer to the [loss of the last ISIS bastion in Syria](#).

As the US and other western countries – that is, in the fantasised imagery of Jihadism, the Crusaders – helped the Kurds to defeat ISIS in Baghouz, Al Baghdadi makes clear that his target was the West. If he chose expensive hotels and churches in Sri Lanka as target instead, this was because he was unable to target more obvious Western symbols.

The Sri Lanka attacks mean, therefore, that at the moment of its perpetration, Al Baghdadi's Jihadi organisation lacked the capacity to develop a large coordinated attack against the West.

Time will tell whether this situation will remain so long. In the meantime, we see that anti-Western Jihadi attacks can target virtually any location, even countries where Islam is not seen as a major geopolitical element.

5. Sowing conflict and hate

The standard Jihadi attack has two possible objectives. The first is to threaten one's way towards the appeasement of underlying grievances - real or supposed. The second is to threaten one's way towards influence among the Muslim community itself.

Whereas Jihadi leaders such as Bin Laden were especially careful in constructing a message of grievance – we act thus because of Zionist occupation, because of the desecration of our land by the infidels or because of any real (or made up) offense to our people – modern generations are more blunt and do not show any need to ‘justify’ the logic of religious supremacy.

Bin Laden’s Jihadism would use to full extent all instruments of double talk, disinformation and ambivalence deemed necessary for maximising the impact of attacks. Al Baghdadi is less sophisticated in its message. His purpose is double-sided - conquering influence among the Muslim community both through a show of force and through the fomenting of hate by ‘outsiders’.

For as long as societies continue to believe Jihadist propaganda and see attacks as made in the name of ‘Islam’, people will tend to see all Muslims as responsible for it. Thus the Muslim community itself - which most suffers the impact of religious fanaticism, and also which better knows how to combat it – is held responsible. Cornering all followers of Islam – the overwhelming majority of which are not radical in any way - into having no option but embrace Jihadism is an often-misunderstood, structural goal of contemporary ‘Jihadist’ terrorism.

A blind reaction or even an over-reaction to a terrorist attack might be as detrimental as an appeasing one. In Sri Lanka as elsewhere, an inter-faith and inter-ethnic strong dialogue is essential for annihilating the terrorists’ expected impacts.

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