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Islamic State: New Phase of Global Expansion?

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SYNOPSIS

Despite battlefield losses and reversals in Iraq and Syria, the multiple suicide bombings in Sri Lanka on 21 April 2019 demonstrated that the so-called Islamic State (IS) is entering a new phase of global expansion.

COMMENTARY

ISLAMIC STATE (IS) claimed responsibility for the Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka on 21 April 2019. The coordinated near-simultaneous suicide attacks killed more than 350 and injured nearly 500. The attacks on Shangri-La, Cinnamon Grand and Kingsbury, the luxury hotels in the heart of the capital aimed to kill westerners. The attacks targeting St. Anthony's Shrine in Colombo, St. Sebastian's Church in Negombo, and Zion Church in Batticaloa aiming to kill Christians. They were all crowd-pulling places on Sunday. The targets were iconic, strategic and symbolic.

In classic IS-style, IS photographed the bombers, some with their faces covered and others smiling. Five of the six bombers were identified as Sri Lankans belonging to one of the IS support groups operating in Sri Lanka. Against the backdrop of an IS flag, all the six suicide bombers carrying automatic weapons pointed to the sky, raising a single index finger denoting their cause. They were identified by their IS names – Abu Barra As Sailani, Abu Muktar As Sailani, Abu Ubaida As Sailani and others. 'As Sailani' at the end of the names denoted that five of the six attackers were Ceylonese, the previous name for Sri Lanka.

New Face of IS?

The IS attacks targeting luxury hotels and Catholic churches in Asia demonstrate the new face of IS-style terrorism. A decentralised IS mounted similar attacks on churches in Indonesia's Surabaya on 13 May 2018 and Philippines's Jolo on 27 January 2019. To seek revenge for the losses it suffered in its heartland, IS focused on Sri Lanka, a lucrative target in Asia. Some of its supporters justified their strikes on Catholic targets in Sri Lanka to the white supremacist terrorist attack in New Zealand on 15 March 2019. Having stealthily built its capabilities over three years, the Sri Lankan branch of IS responded with revenge and retaliation.

Since the defeat of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) on 26 May 2009, Sri Lanka faced a new threat. IS' declaration of a caliphate on 29 June 2014 appealed to a tiny segment of Sri Lankan youth. From 2014-2018, IS steadfastly exploited Sri Lanka by recruiting and radicalising its vulnerable young. The international coalitions working with Iraqi and Syrian forces militarily fought and defeated IS in the physical space.

With a vengeance, the returnees from Iraq and Syria and diehard supporters and sympathisers in their homelands responded to the call by the IS leadership to avenge Baghouz, the last IS stronghold. The indoctrinated personalities and cells attacked Buddhist shrines and broke Buddha images.

Seeding the IS Nucleus in Sri Lanka

The nucleus of the Sri Lankan support group of IS was seeded by Abu Shuraih Sailani, a Sri Lankan recruit who travelled to Syria. He was killed in a coalition strike on 12 July 2015. Together with 40 other Sri Lankans, he had travelled to Turkey and then to Syria. When the self-anointed caliph Abu Bakr al Baghdadi invited Muslims from all over the world to migrate to Syria and Iraq, a total of 41 Sri Lankan Muslims from two extended families travelled to Iraq and Syria.

When the security situation in Iraq and Syria deteriorated, the flow of Sri Lankan recruits diminished and a few residing in Syria wished to return. The Sri Lankan leader of IS was killed in a US air strike and a few returned through Turkey. Before most of the Sri Lankans who joined IS in Iraq and Syria were killed, they continued to instigate and inspire their families and friends to join IS.

The IS propaganda spread mostly through social media radicalising a few hundred Sri Lankans. By joining IS, they were indoctrinated into believing that they were serving God. Determined to fight for their faith and the faithful, they believed that martyrdom was the highest sacrifice. Educated and mostly from well-to-do families, they turned into killers. They formed the IS core in Sri Lanka. Six members of the IS branch staged the attacks on Easter Sunday.

State Response

By mounting operations to hunt the perpetrators, imposing curfew and blocking Facebook, Instagram, Viber, and WhatsApp after the attacks, government demonstrated resolve to act. Nonetheless, the Sri Lankan government will have to develop a comprehensive strategy to respond to the IS build-up in the country.

Hitherto, the Sri Lankan Muslims have been a model community. They had worked together with the government to defeat the Tamil Tigers. They had suffered ethnic cleansing and endured intermittent massacres including horrific attacks by the Tamil Tigers against their mosques in Batticaloa.

Five capabilities are needed to manage the threat:

First, restoring the security and intelligence services vital to fight the threat. Second, regulating the religious space to prevent radical preachers, especially foreign preachers, from preaching hatred. Third, managing the cyber space, both taking down extremist content and holding service providers accountable for hosting extremist content.

Fourth, creating national education rather than having separate schools for Muslims, Christians and Buddhists. Fifth, a rehabilitation programme to deradicalise terrorists and a community engagement programme to counter-radicalise supporters in the community.

IS Entering a New Phase?

The IS blow back from Iraq and Syria is similar to Afghanistan when al Qaeda was dismantled. The al Qaeda-centric threat spread with attacks from Bali to Madrid and London. Similarly, the manifestation of the IS-centric threat will witness attacks akin to what the world has just seen in Sri Lanka.

Contrary to assessments by western leaders, most notably by President Donald Trump, that IS has been defeated, IS is actually entering a new phase. It is re-emerging to fight the world with a vengeance. The threat group many believed would disappear after its fighters were decimated in Bargouz in the Euphrates Valley has, in fact, returned.

Sri Lanka is not an exception to the global build-up of IS. As IS has created a deep network in South Asia with nodes in South India, Maldives and Sri Lanka, the governments will need to exchange and share intelligence and dismantle the terrorist support and operational structures. To fight back, the security agencies of the region will need to work with the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and other partners that have mapped the international links. Working with the Muslim community, Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans will have to work hard to secure their country from this new phase of threat.

What Sri Lankan leaders should guard against is reciprocal radicalisation or the tit-for-tat attacks. Although IS had hitherto attacked places of religious worship, the massacre of Muslims in the Christchurch mosques in New Zealand has upped the ante. The government leaders should work with Muslim, Christian and Buddhist communities especially their leaders not to be trapped in a cycle of revenge.

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