

## Re-thinking the Sri Lankan Approach of Countering Islamist Violent Extremism

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**Abstract-** With the rise of Islamic State (IS), South Asian terrorist groups have been vehemently influenced since many of the terror groups such as Tanzim Ansar al-Tawheed fi Bilad al-Hind, Tehreek-e-Khilafat, Jundullah etc. have pledged allegiance (bayath) to IS in 2014 and 2015. Also, in 2015 Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K) was established in the Afghan-Pak border to enhance the tentacles of IS. Besides, many of the South Asian individuals have been stimulated to join as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq or to conduct home-grown attacks influenced by IS ideology. After the demise of the IS in Iraq and Syria in 2019, IS has focused on the Indian Subcontinent due to the continuation of violence in the region which assist to foster new dimension of terrorist threats in the region. In such context, the nature of the Islamist extremism in Sri Lanka could be defined as a problem which has occurred in the 'periphery' (international) but relates to the 'core' (domestic) due to the created fault lines in the local context. Within such context, this research intends to highlight four aspects in dealing with Islamist extremism in Sri Lanka: 1) Importance of understanding the changing nature of Islamist extremism in the periphery 2) The influence of Islamist extremism in the core 3) Mutually exclusiveness of the growing Islamist extremism with the counter approach implemented in Sri Lanka 4) Reasons for such mismatch in counter approach and the problem of countering Islamist extremism in Sri Lanka. Finally, it has been highlighted in this research that, in order to counter the threat of Islamist extremism in Sri Lanka, there should be a mix approach of enemy-centric strategies and population centric strategic due to the volatile nature of center of gravity in Islamist extremism.

*Keywords: Islamist Extremism, Counter Violent Extremism (CVE), Enemy/Population Centric*

*Approach, Reciprocal Radicalization, Cumulative Extremism*

### Introduction

Voice of Al Hind – Issue 3 of Ansar ul Khilafah in Hind emphasize the fact that Islamic State (IS) is trying to provide the necessary ideological support to gather the scattered Islamist extremists to function through regional cooperation under specific regional coordination and

leadership in South Asia. Within such context, IS is in the position of developing regional cooperation in South Asia due to common culture, belief, values and sects among the Muslim population in this region. One of the reasons for the failure of IS was that, they tried to recruit individuals from different geographical locations and compressed them in to one particular territorial space and controlled them through brutality and fear, which affected governance of the so called 'Caliphate'. Learning from past experiences, it is evident that they have changed their modus operandi to articulate 'regional hubs' while making the Islamist extremists mutually inclusive through continuous propaganda and recruitment in these regions, especially focusing on capitalizing the tensed political environments in South Asian countries.

Therefore, with the focus of IS in South Asia, this reach questions the approach of countering Islamist violent extremism in Sri Lanka, highlighting that threat of Islamist extremism and the response from the Sri Lankan security apparatus are mutually exclusive without any correspondence to each other. Hence, this research aims to highlight the importance of a possibly integrated Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) approach combining 'enemy-centric' and 'population-centric' strategies to deal with

Islamist extremism, while comprehending the repercussions mounting from this threat to multi-cultural and multi-religious societies in Sri Lanka.

### **Problem Statement**

The Sri Lankan government approach to countering Islamist violent extremism before and after the Easter Sunday Attack has not been adequate to deal with the growing Islamist violent extremism in the country.

Sri Lankan CVE approach lack in identifying the influence of global and regional Islamist extremist climate and its applications to Sri Lanka and, therefore limited to only monitoring the local Islamist extremists, instead linking them with the international phenomena. Mostly the, CVE strategies have been incorporated with the counter terrorism tactics which were used in defeating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), whereas the problem of Islamist extremism is different in nature to the issue of ethnic separatism. Mostly, the problem of Islamist extremism is treated as a domestic issue separating it from the regional and global developments. Therefore, the problem, the repercussions and the solutions have been miscalculated since the problematization of the issue has occurred inversely. Therefore, there is a mismatch between the growing influence of Islamist extremism in Sri Lanka and the approaches of CVE implemented by the Sri Lankan government to contain the threat.

### **Growing Islamist Violent Extremism In The Periphery**

The threat of Islamist violent extremism is flouting and has become more globalized due to universalization of the concept of 'caliphate' by different jihadi groups, mainly by IS. Since, the downfall of IS in Syria and Iraq, IS has narrated its ideology to instigate lone-wolves and thereby make the threat of jihad more 'fluid' than ever. While, liquefied jihadi structure is encouraging lone-wolves to perform, IS physical influence in Sahel (Islamic State of Greater Sahara) has increased, depicting a shift of its militant capability and frail counter terrorism strategies implemented in the terrain of Mali by French led allied forces. Also, IS aligned cyber groups are intensely sharing posts against the Sri Lankan deployment to Mali which post a threat to the Sri

Lankans residing inside and outside of Sri Lanka, mainly the security personnel.

On the other hand, it can be assumed that IS is reverting its basics by trying to reorganize its longstanding wilayaths which have become malfunctioned for some time. By doing so IS is trying to depict that it is still active and intact even after the death of Baghdadi. From an analytical perception, open call for jihadists to join the ongoing battle fields will bring negative impact to all the conflict zones which are fighting against jihadist, not only territories with the threat of IS. This is an indication where jihad is becoming globalized rather than confined to one particular organization or group of individuals. Under such circumstances likeminded jihadi individuals who have the urge to fight and die for Allah will join any group which serves that purpose around the world. Therefore, it will be difficult for the security and intelligence community personnel to track the jihadists and to maintain the security status quo which will be much fragile since there is a long list of jihadi organizations around the world functioning and fighting for a common cause. Also, containment of IS will be difficult in a fluid jihadi structure with promotion of unusual innovative attacking styles.

### **Complexity of Islamist Extremism in South Asia**

The complexity of the Afghan security due to the presence of Taliban, Al – Qaida (AQ) and Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K), is directly influencing the security landscape of South Asia including Sri Lanka. The presence of foreign terrorist fighters in Afghanistan might cross borders within the South Asian region and as mentioned in the 26<sup>th</sup> Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Concerning ISIS, Al – Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities, these fighters can infiltrate into the territories in South Asia through illegal channels and plan terrorist activities, which has also occurred in the past. However, such terrorists only being part and parcel of a violent group is queried since, 'jihadi' elements in South Asia are always manipulated by state actors such as India and Pakistan to fulfil their political agendas.

However, many individuals claim that Islamic State of Khorasan Province (IS-K) has crippled due the surrender of some of its fighters to the

Afghan security forces in late 2019, yet, it has not become a reason for the demise of the IS-K. Proving this, 26<sup>th</sup> Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Concerning ISIS, Al – Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities claims there are nearly 2,200 individuals remaining in the said terrorist outfit while the influence of IS has encroached vehemently to Kerala and Karnataka, India.

The anticipated cripple of IS-K was due to the re-organization of Taliban and their determination to turning Afghanistan in to an Islamic Emirate. With such development, Taliban will eventually gain momentum to rule while USA troops withdraw from Afghanistan. This will automatically give rise to jihadi organizations in the region particularly AQ and its affiliates. Also, other likeminded jihadists who claim for a caliphate will be attracted to Afghanistan or to the jihadi organizations breeding from this ground. Eventually, Afghanistan being the center of gravity of modern jihadism, will become a ground of concentration of jihadi ideology under the patronage of Taliban, AQ and IS-K. Hence, predicted fall of IS-K will not sweep away the threat of jihadism in Afghanistan. In fact, it will transform to a full-fledged Jihadi territory under the banner of Taliban which will support many other jihadi organizations in the Indian Subcontinent including AQ and the affiliates. Therefore, the threat of jihadism remains constant while it can even increase in the Indian Subcontinent when Afghanistan falls into the hand of Taliban.

On the other hand, it is not yet depicted that AQ, Taliban and IS-K will enter into a 'marriage of convenience', due to constant attacks launched by Taliban in areas of IS-K in Afghanistan. In fact, IS-K has portrayed their dislike in linking with Taliban and AQ, stating that both are 'agents' 'puppets' of the enemies of Allah (USA). However, Taliban will continue to link with AQ due to the longstanding relationship between the two groups. Hence, IS-K will remain as a distinct jihadi element while Taliban and AQ share a common bond mainly due to shared financing capabilities and safe-haven inside Afghanistan.

### **Volatility of Islamist Extremism In Sri Lanka**

There is a significant change in the method and scale of attacks mainly encouraging the lone

wolves in South Asia to utilize knives, vehicles, petrol bombs etc through social media platforms such as Telegram, WhatsApp, Rocket. Chat etc. These attacking methods are commonly used by IS, yet what makes the South Asian region including Sri Lanka vigilant is that the constant emphasis on such attacks in South Asia by the IS, can be heard by the domestic/ regional extremists who can apparently transform into lone wolves and, such activities can be turned into a common trend within South Asia. Hence, the lucrative propaganda utilized and disseminated in social media encourage small scale and low intensity attacks by IS militants or any other individual, making the terrorist think about attacks more innovatively. These individuals need not to be a part of a hierarchically governed terrorist outfit, making the threat of Islamist extremism more fluid than ever.

Also, the problem of returning Foreign Terrorist Fighter (FTFs) to the South Asian region, have posted a threat to peace and security of the countries in this region. The problem of FTFs is that, it is difficult to identify them, if the relevant departments do not have information of these individuals. However, returning fighters could engage in 'Lone Wolf' activities or form networked cells of like-minded individuals while systematically penetrating the radicalization to the Muslim society. This was depicted by how Sadiq Abdul Haq, a trained returnee from Syria has influenced some individuals from the Islamic Student Movement of Jammāt – e – Islami (JI) to get engage in an extreme activity in Sri Lanka in December 2018. Such returnees are capable of revitalizing moribund jihadist groups by joining them and bringing new skills. They can also vent their rage against societies they perceive to have failed them or participated in 'oppressing' Muslims.

Within such context, various Sunni groups such as JI, Ceylon Tawheed Jammāt (CTJ), Sri Lanka Tawheed Jammāt (SLTJ) etc. and various individuals who do not align to any such organization, promote violent extremism through the 'divide and rule concept'. Due to segregation within Islamic population itself, there is high amount of conversions being promoted especially by the Shia Muslims within Islam. In this context, due to the ideological differences, sectarian clashes can be a reality within the Sri

Lankan territory while this issue can be promoted by Sunni terrorist organization like IS and its supporters in the South Asian region to recruit more individuals to their organizations.

Within the post Easter Sunday security atmosphere, the individuals who aligned with Tawheed ideology can be more vulnerable due to physical and mental marginalization in the community. Also, they can be exposed to online-silent radicalization. Therefore, such a dynamic milieu has the potential of creating a movement of like-minded people overtly or covertly which will disrupt the prevailing security set up in Sri Lanka.

Besides, with the growing Islamist extremism in Maldives, Sri Lanka can be utilized as a 'transit hub' by external extremists, while Southeast Asian terrorists who belong to organizations such as Jammāt Ansarut Daulah (JAD) will utilize Sri Lanka as a 'transit point' to reach Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan.

Also, the most of the Madarasas functioning in Sri Lanka are not properly registered and covered by a legal framework/mechanism. Besides, mostly the curriculums of these Madarasas are obscure and the presence of outsiders are limited and unsolicited by the Madarasa authorities. Therefore, the activities are not depicted or exposed to the outside world. In such circumstances, there is a risk of the individuals in these Madarasas been exposed to radicalization due to unauthorized curriculum and individual ideologies penetrated into the minds of the students by the so-called teachers or clerics.

Besides, Muslim women adhering into radicalization has become a reality in the Sri Lankan context when it was exposed that women have also participated the training sessions of Zaharan Bin Hashim, who is allegedly known as the Easter Sunday mastermind in 2019. Therefore, women focusing on jihadi ideology need to be considered as a threat due to their nature of strong persuasion in ideology in any given circumstance and the method that they can influence the children to become 'jihadi cubs' and their husbands to become 'mujahideens'. One the other hand, the services that they can render to the jihadi world are massive, since they can certainly be propagators or fundraisers or professionals catering specific services and

expertise. Most importantly, they can be utilized as suicide members.

Within such a volatile situation, it is questionable whether it is possible to counter the influence of Islamist extremism in Sri Lanka with the existing strategies and tactics.

### **Variation of Center of Gravity in Islamist Extremism and Disparity of the Counter Approach**

According to Lucía Martínez Ordóñez enemy-centric tactics are opposite of population-centric approaches in counterinsurgency. She further explains that "the enemy-centric approach states that it is the insurgents' defeat that will cause their collapse" while population-centric approach focuses on "strategies to win the 'hearts and minds' of the population". While learning from the failing enemy-centric approaches in Iraq, in 2009 US General Stanley McChrystal stated that he intends to win the Iraqi insurgency by convincing the population rather than killing the enemy. Yet, the success of the population-centric counter insurgency strategies implemented in Iraq is highly debatable following the current context. However, winning hearts and minds of the population should not be undermined when analysing the success of British in winning the Malayan insurgency. However, it is time-consuming than the enemy-centric approach but with a smaller number of casualties.

Extracting from these two approaches, Sri Lanka's experience in counter terrorism has been more of 'enemy centric' than 'population centric' especially during the time of the Eelam War IV with the LTTE. Therefore, the threat of Islamist extremism which replaced the menace of LTTE after 2009, was treated in the same manner, rather than identifying the actual center/centers of gravity in dealing with this newly emerged problem of Islamist extremism within the country.

Daniel J. Smith, Kelley Jeter, and Odin Westgaard argue that Eikmeier's application of center of gravity has recognized the leadership of IS as the "strategic center of gravity". In the contrary, even if Abdullah Orokzai a.k.a Aslam Farooqi, the local IS leader in Afghanistan was arrested on 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020 and Baghdadi was killed in October 2019, the threat of jihadism has not halted with the execution of terrorist leaders leaving a question

whether actually the 'leadership' is the only significant 'center of gravity' in jihadism. If it was the actual 'center of gravity' then by killing Bin Laden, Baghdadi and arresting of Abdullah Orokzai should have made a difference in the landscape of 'modern terrorism'. Yet, it is not the situation. That means there should be a different 'center of gravity' or multiple centers of gravity' which transform potential individuals to become extremists. Hence, 'ideology' becomes the other important 'center of gravity' besides 'leadership' which drives the vulnerable Muslims to become martyrs and mujahideens under the banner of Islam.

It is evident that there is a misconception of identifying the actual 'centers of gravity' in fighting modern terrorism deriving from Islamist extremism. While the centers of gravity in modern terrorism appear as 'ideology' and 'leadership' hand-in-hand, national security forces are only hunting the heads of the leaders. Therefore, enemy centric approach in addressing Islamist extremism has not achieved its goal of limiting the expansion of the threat due to negligence of addressing the 'ideology' which speaks to the 'hearts and minds' of the people. This depicts that, while the terrorists are utilizing a mix approach of paralysing the enemy and winning the confidence of the Muslim population, the national security forces are only focusing on killing the opponent while leaving them to take patronage among their sympathizers. Therefore, the approach of the enemy and CVE approach of the security forces do not connect in equilibrium since both are driving in opposite directions. This is a universal problem and therefore, also applicable to Sri Lanka as well.

In this context, the Select Committee of Parliament to look into and Report to Parliament on the Terrorist Attacks that took place in different places in Sri Lanka on 21 April 2019, highlights the loop holes of intelligence collection mechanism. As a result, it asserts the incompetency of enemy-centric approach in dealing with the threat of Islamist extremism in Sri Lanka:

"It must be questioned as to why the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI) who had a strong network on the ground was unable to or chose not to inform the necessary parties of possible unrest on the ground and of the activities of Zahran and his allies including Army Mohideen"

Select Committee of Parliament to look into and Report to Parliament on the Terrorist Attacks that took place in different places in Sri Lanka on 21 April 2019 also recognize the fact that the intelligence mechanism of the country was unable to identify the dynamics of local and international environment thus lead to one of the major intelligence failure which killed 269 innocent people.

## Discussion

Instead of introducing a systematic approach to countering Islamist extremism with the combination of 'enemy centric' and 'population centric' methods, government has considered on developing ad hoc activities to address this threat. For an example, Office of National Action Plan for Countering and Preventing Radicalization, Violent Extremism, and Terrorism under the Defence Ministry was established in 2019. Yet a systematic approach in understanding radicalization in Sri Lanka is yet to be implemented. Also, still there has not been a viable CVE strategy to de-radicalize the detainees of Easter Sunday attack and disengage the vulnerable Muslim individuals who can embrace Islamist extremism. Without understanding the root causes of radicalization and, try to balance the approach of CVE between enemy-centric and population-centric procedures, such above mentioned government mechanisms will be inefficient in dealing with rising threat of extremism and possibly may later seize to exist.

On the other hand, before and after the Easter Sunday attack, Government's approach in incorporating 'population centric' strategies in CVE mechanism was laborious due to the time-consuming manner of those procedures. The results of these soft approaches of 'winning the hearts and minds' of the population are reaped after extensive time and could not be therefore, utilized for political reasons. As a result, these approaches were provided with less consideration and implementation for political motives. However, in order to win the hearts and minds of the population; one should understand what makes the individuals become isolated within a political system. Absence of violence in post conflict states does not mean that they have full-fledged peace in replace. Rather contrary, the society will go through a 'competition for violence' by different elements and the vacuum

will be filled by another violent group under the same banner or under a different categorization. Consequently, Sri Lanka is now experiencing a similar phenomenon. The vacuum of violence created by the LTTE is now been replaced by the clash between Buddhist nationalism and Islamist extremism. As a matter of fact, “extremist groups fuel one another’s rhetoric and/or actions, including violence” and the way in which one form of extremism can feed off and magnify other forms” in multi-cultural and multi-religious society like Sri Lanka, need to be analysed in detail. This process is known as ‘reciprocal radicalization’ by Professor Kim Knott, Dr Ben Lee and Simon Copeland. As professor Abbas explains, far right extremist groups are interested in claiming again for their country while Islamic extremist groups align with “global identity politics”. The current context of Islamic phobia by the Buddhist nationals (majority) relates to the ‘cycle of resistance’ (Figure 1), occurring through escalation of fundamentalism both in majority Sinhala Buddhists and minority Muslims in Sri Lanka. The Sinhala Buddhist majority claims for the restoration of Sinhala Buddhist land and practices of the Sinhala culture while Islamic extremist relates to the exclusion/marginalization of the Islamic communities in democratic societies which relate to the global phenomenon.

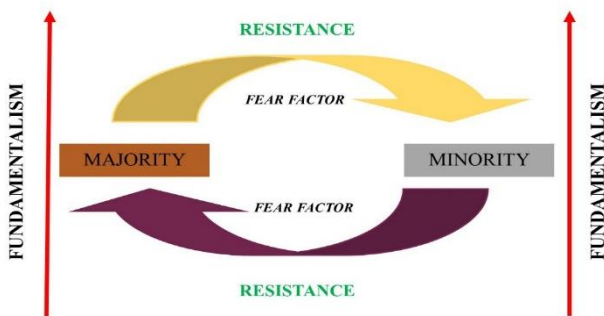


Figure 1. The Cycle of Resistance  
 Source: author

Even though Professor Kim Knott, Dr Ben Lee and Simon Copeland explain the meaning of reciprocal radicalization, they have not highlighted how this phenomenon is applicable in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society which has been exposed to violence for a period of time. Yet, while appreciating the definition provided by these scholars for reciprocal radicalization, this research emphasizes that, in the practice of unusual fundamental principles/practices which have not been previously highlighted by the Muslims in Sri Lanka, has provoked certain

amount of ‘fear’ in the majority. Reciprocally this affects in increasing the fundamental rhetoric and practices by the Sinhala Buddhist against the Minority. As a result, rhetoric or practices of one group feeds the extremist ideologies of the other group while resisting each other. Therefore, both the groups have engrossed in the process of radicalization through violent extremism while feeding one another. However, in order to solve this problem, the ‘fear factor’ needs to be address through strengthening the ‘social contract’ between the ruler/government and citizens. The above diagram explains ‘the cycle of resistance’ introduces as a model in this research to understand the reason for ‘reciprocal radicalization’ in the Sri Lankan society as a mean to counter the influence of rising Islamist extremism in Sri Lanka.

It is now evident that only by ‘winning hearts and minds’ of the Islamic population would not decrease extremism in the Sri Lankan society, instead issues related to Muslims and ‘religious/ethnic others’ need to be considered at the same time. Therefore, implementation of population-centric approaches should target multiple communities simultaneously.

### Conclusion

With the changing landscape of Islamist extremism in the periphery, its influence has infiltrated in to the ‘core’ and the counter approaches to the threat is shaped accordingly. However, the problem of Islamist extremism and the counter approach to that problem are mutually exclusive in Sri Lanka. Hence, it is important to re-evaluate the approaches of countering Islamist violent extremism and establishing a systematic approach to CVE in Sri Lanka is needed to contain the Islamist extremism while considering the nature of extremism and application of enemy-centric and population-centric approaches to the security context in Sri Lanka.

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