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# Analyzing the Impact of Daesh on Terror Groups in South Asia – Case of Sri Lanka

Sinduja U. W. Jayaratne

## Introduction

It is obvious that the propaganda and recruitment strategies of ISIS have changed due to the use of new technologies and equipment. (Ward 2018) Not only are terrorist organizations in the Middle East, Africa, Europe and Southeast Asia inspired by Daesh (also known as ISIS, IS or the Islamic State), but many South Asian Islamic extremist groups such as Jundul Al Khilafha Kashmir, Walayath Kurasan, Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh, Lakshar e Thaiba, Tanzim Ansar al-Tawheed fi Bilad al-Hin are also influenced by ISIS. (Sandhu 2016) In many occasions it has been evident that their *modus operandi*, financial tactics, ideology and propaganda have been inspired by Daesh. Hence, it is important to analyze the impact of Daesh on terror groups and networks in South Asia since the region is becoming a 'hotspot' of terrorist activities. In this article, Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka is used as a case study to highlight the ISIS influence in the South Asian region.

## Evolution of ISIS

Osama Bin Laden was active in fighting against the 'infidels' from the Soviet Union, when the latter invaded Afghanistan in 1979. (Gunaratna 2002) The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan became a stage for Bin Laden to put into effect his organizational and operational skills through Al Qaeda. As a Jihadist in Afghanistan, he was efficient in fundraising, construction of infrastructure, recruitment etc. He was also responsible for enabling the logistics of weapons for his fighters. His commitment to confronting the Soviets was depicted again in 1984; when he built a guesthouse in Peshawar for foreign Muslim fighters who came to join the battle. (Hashim 2001) Then, alongside

Abdullah Azzam he established the Maktab al Khidamat; which is known as the Jihadist Service Bureau to raise funds and recruit foreign fighters for the battle against the Soviets. (Zahid 2015) It is evident that Afghanistan was a breeding ground of jihadi terrorism and Pakistan happened to be the sanctuary or safe haven at the time. (Jones 2018) However, in May 1988 the Soviets started to leave Afghanistan and in the same year Al Qaeda was established by "Abdullah Azzam and his deputy Osama bin Ladin". (Hellmich 2011)

Unlike Osama bin Laden, a Jordanian called Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (leader of Jammaat al-Twahid wa-l-Jihad) the father of ISIS, was unable to make a significant contribution to the Jihadi resistance against the Soviets in Afghanistan. He reached Afghanistan in 1989 and by that time the war had ended. During his stay in Afghanistan he managed to linkup with likeminded extremist individuals. In 1992 he returned to "Jordan where he collaborated with his spiritual teacher Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, whose ideological sophistication and advanced knowledge of Islam further strengthened Zarqawi's commitment to the black and white worldview endorsed by Salafism." (Jasko 2018) Maqdisi and Zarqawi were captured by security forces in 1994 while executing a terrorist plan and were imprisoned for nearly five years. In 1999, Zarqawi and 14 other detainees were released from prison and then departed to Afghanistan to meet Osama Bin Laden. Even though Zarqawi and Osama bin Laden are considered to be contemporaries, they had differences in their "backgrounds, leadership style and aims." (Zelin 2014)

The prominent difference between Osama and Zarqawi was their socio-economic background. The leader of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden belonged to the upper middle class and had a university education. Conversely, the leader of Jammaat al-Twahid wa-l-Jihad, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was from a poor and a less educated background. Zarqawi's criminal past and vision of 'takfir' (accusing another Muslim

of heresy and thereby justifying his killing) generated disagreements between the two when they met for the first time in Afghanistan in 1999. (Zelin 2014)

Furthermore, Bin Laden possess the ability to influence the 'Afghan Arabs' through his personal fortune and his foreign attacks. He also laid out training camps in the Taliban controlled territory. On the other hand, Zarqawi wanted to pursue his own training camp in Herat in Afghanistan with some of his followers who were released from a Jordanian prison, but faced hurdles due to the influence of Al Qaeda. Instead bin Laden continuously provided money to Zarqawi till 9/11 attack. However, the ideologies and the beliefs of the two organizations continued to differ. Therefore, to balance the influence of al Qaeda in Afghanistan, Bin Laden requested Zarqawi several times to pledge a 'bayath' (religious oath of allegiance). However, Zarqawi refused to undertake the oath every time, and did not want to lose the individuality and the originality of the organization by merging with Al-Qaeda.

In 1999, Zarqawi established the Jammaat al-Twahid wa-l-Jihad in Jordan during the Iraqi insurgency, when moved to Baghdad to obtain medical treatment for his injured leg. (Zelin 2014) During 2003-2004, Jammaat al-Twahid wa-l-Jihad became more of a decentralized organization, fighting the USA led coalition whilst attracting many foreign fighters and organisations to its ranks. (Gambill 2004) On 17th October 2004, Zarqawi pledged bayath to Osama, creating the group 'Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn' which is also translated as 'Al Qaeda in Iraq' (AQI); and "AQI became the first affiliate organization formally accepted by Al Qaeda and the only one personally announced by bin Laden." (Lahoud, et al. 2012) In 2014, AQI became the 'Islamic State' under the leadership of Abu Bakar al Bhagdadi by splitting from Al Qaeda owing to ideological and operational differences such as:

1. Aqidah (creed),
2. Manhaj (methodology),
3. takfir (excommunication),
4. establishment of Caliphate in unlawful manner
5. 'baaqiya wa tatamaddad' which means remaining and expanding territory. (Jasko et al 2018)

South Asian terrorist groups have been influenced by ISIS since many of the terror groups such as *Tanzim Ansar al-Tawheed fi Bilad al-Hind*, *Tehreek-e-Khilafat*, *Jundullah* etc. have pledged bayath to ISIS in 2014 and 2015. (IntelCenter 2016) Also in 2015, Islamic State in Kurasan Province was established in the Afghan-Pakistan border to enhance the reach of ISIS. Many South Asian individuals have been influenced to join as foreign fighters to these groups operating in Syria and Iraq. For an example "on a per capita basis, Maldives is one of the largest contributor of FTFs to the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq, reinforcing concerns expressed about the radicalization of young Maldivians and their support for transnational terrorist groups." (UNODC 2018)

After the demise of the Daesh in Iraq and Syria, its presence was sensed in Marawi, Philippines. The security forces were unable to predict and contain the terrorist group. (Parameswaran 2017) Having failed in their attempt to establish a caliphate in the Philippines, ISIS is presently seeking an alternative territory to create its 'caliphate'. Kashmir can be considered as one predictable choice for Daesh due to the continued violence in the territory. (Braithwaite & D'costa 2018) Proving the above argument, *Jundul Khilafah Kashmir* which supports ISIS and its functions in Kashmir, has published an online magazine called '*Al Risalah*'<sup>5</sup>. The content and graphics in the magazine is similar to "*Dabiq*" and "*Rumiyah*" which were two online magazines of

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<sup>5</sup> The information was collected during a confidential interview with security personnel in Sri Lanka.



Daesh. The following points have been highlighted in the first issue of this magazine in January 2019.

1. The importance of (migration) 'higrah' which is the first element to create an Islamic State.
  2. The hatred towards Shia's. This is one of the main reasons for Islamic State to pop up in Iraq and Syria in 2014.
  3. Importance of waging Jihad against 'infidels' and the 'kafirs'.
- (Welch, 2018)

### **Islamic Ideology Used by ISIS**

ISIS rigidly rejects any kind of innovation and/or developments since the period of the Prophet. They assert that any deviations from prudent insights which they draw from their reading of the Quran and the Hadith, should be discarded. They argue that any form of Islam such as Shi'ism, Sufism etc. or any person who follows a different interpretation from theirs will be eradicated. This ideology demonstrates characteristics of Salafi Takfirism. ISIS thus justifies their brutality by claiming that they aim to bring about a "pure form" of Islam. (Barrett 2014) They try to achieve this goal by uniting all Muslims under one rule discarding any form or any fragmentations within Islam and by creating a truly Islamic rule which they call the 'caliphate'.

The ISIS magazine- 'Dabiq' emphasizes Zarqawi's plan to establish the 'caliphate'. According to Dabiq, Zarqawi was planning to establish the 'caliphate' in five steps: *hijrah* (emigration), *jama'ah* (congregation), destabilize *taghut* (idolatry), *tamkin* (consolidation), and *khalifah* (caliphate) (Gambhir 2014). The first three steps were achieved by the al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) which became the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). Furthermore, ISI progressed in achieving the status of a 'caliphate' with the support of Jihadist forces in nine countries by November 2014. (Zavadski 2014) The following are the organizations which have pledged allegiance to ISIS in order to pursue its ambition of the 'caliphate'.

COUNTRY	ORGANIZATION
<b>Pakistan</b>	Taliban splinter group <b>Jundallah</b> joined a handful of other <b>Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan affiliates</b> that have already pledged allegiance to ISIS
	<b>Tehreek-e-Khilafat</b>
	<b>Jamaat al-Ahrar</b>
<b>Egypt</b>	<b>Ansar Beit al-Maqdis</b>
<b>Algeria</b>	<b>Soldiers of the Caliphate</b>
<b>Libya</b>	<b>Islamic Youth Shura Council</b>
<b>Philippines</b>	<b>Abu Sayyaf</b>
<b>Israel/Gaza</b>	<b>Ansar Beit al-Maqdis</b>
<b>Lebanon</b>	<b>Free Sunnis of Baalbek Brigade</b>
<b>Indonesia</b>	<b>Ashorut Tauhid</b>
<b>Jordan</b>	<b>Sons of the Call for Tawhid and Jihad</b>

Table 1.1

Sunni and Shi'a Muslims have been rivals for centuries. The ISIS (which claims to have been created to safeguard Sunni Muslims) has brutally slaughtered Shi'a Muslims not only in Syria and Iraq but also in other countries such as Kuwait, Afghanistan etc. Salafi Jihadists such as ISIS refer to Shi'a Muslims as "Safavid Rafida". (Jones 2014) The meaning of 'Rafida' is 'deserters' or 'defectors'. (Jones 2014) ISIS refers to Shi'a Muslims in these two terms because they do not recognize Abu Bakar and his successors as legitimate rulers in the early Muslim community. Furthermore 'Safavid' is referred to the 'Safavid' dynasty who ruled Persia and parts of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus from 1501 to 1722. (Jones 2014) Among all

the Salafi Jihadists, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi (the founder of Jammaat al-Twahid wa-l-Jihad which evolved up to ISIS) was the harshest on the Shi'a Muslims. In fact, he claimed that Shi'a Muslims are the "looming danger and the true challenge" in creating a proper 'caliphate'. (Jones 2014)

Apart from its antipathy towards Shi'a Muslims, ISIS has also successfully molded a radical ideology which attracts many non-Muslims and Muslims to fight for the ISIS. Al-Ayyeri in his book, claims that Muslims can only have one aim in their life. That is to convert each and every single person to Islam and destroy all the other religions, creeds and ideologies which does not tally with the version of ISIS Islam. (Taheri 2014)

Al-Ayyeri's expression of exclusivism has been incorporated into the ISIS ideology. Consequently, ISIS does not recognize nor do they respect any other religion. According to them the only true religion is Islam (Quran 3:19). They do not identify people from other religions and discard the idea of peaceful co-existence by respecting diversity. The Quran however emphasizes Muslims not to criticize or rebuff followers of other religions (Quran 6:52). The Holy text also emphasizes the freedom of thought and religion for all (Qur'an 2:256, 109:6). Most significantly, the Quran Identifies that God is there for all people and not exclusively for Muslims.

Therefore, one can argue the interpretation of the Quran matters since it can either create peaceful co-existence of all mankind which celebrates diversity or it can bring turmoil and chaos to the world. The ISIS, in order to perform what they think as jihad in the name of Islam, they have interpreted certain verses of the Quran to justify their acts of brutality.

### **ISIS Influence in Sri Lanka**

It is no secret that, at present, the ISIS has become a global security threat. Similarly, due to the strategic location and the rapidly growing Muslim population in the country, Sri Lanka has also become exposed to the activities of the ISIS. Sri Lanka has about 9.7% of Muslim population, predominantly in the Eastern Province. (Department of Census and Statistics 2012) This population is highly vulnerable to permeations from extremist elements. There was no concrete evidence that the ISIS was making inroads among the Sri Lankan population until 2015. It was believed that the ISIS merely used the island as a transit point to travel to the Middle East from East Asia.

It has been revealed that several Sri Lankan nationals have supported ISIS by joining the organization as sympathizers / militants and one of the suspects, Mohamed Muhsin Sharhaz Nilam died due to an air strike in Syria. (Kirinde 2015) This can be considered to be the first report of a Sri Lankan fighter dying while fighting abroad. Investigations have revealed that several other family members of this suspect settled in ISIS controlled areas in Syria and engaged in military / administrative activities. As such, the scope of the problem has become much wider. Consequently, it has been understood that ISIS ideology has inspired several extremist individuals from Jamiyathul Millathu Ibrahim Fi Seylani (JMI) and National Thawheed Jammath (NTJ) to conduct the 'Easter Sunday Attack'.

Simultaneously to the emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, JMI was detected in 2015 to be functioning under the leadership of Umeir Mohammed Iqbal. (Pieris 2019) It was revealed that some of the group's member have associated or either listened to the radical preaching of Zaharan Bin Hashim who called himself a Maulavi. The membership of this group has increased up to 125 as at April 2019, out of which, 42 members have been identified as individuals who

have violent extremist ideology.<sup>6</sup> It has been identified that in early 2018, some of the members such as Ilham Mohamed Mohammed Ibrahim, Jameel Mohamed Abdul Latheef, Ahamed Muath and A. M. M. Hastoon have joined a splinter group due to ideological clashes with the leader of JMI. And it had also been exposed that some of the splinter group members were involved in the 21<sup>st</sup> April 2019 attacks in Sri Lanka. Investigations have revealed that, nine individuals have pledged allegiance to ISIS in different locations such as, Aruppola, Mawanella, Hambantota, Nuwara Eliya etc.<sup>7</sup>

Zaharan Bin Hashim was the spokesperson of National Thawheed Jamath (NTJ). Zaharan became a wanted criminal due to a clash which happened in Kaththankudy between Zaharan's fractions with Sunnath wal Jammath and was removed from the organisation in 2017. From 2018 onwards, his extremist preaching were uploaded to Social Media with the logo of 'Al Ghuraba' media which was identified as a pro ISIS media agency. (Zahra-Malik 2019) These videos were inspired/influenced by the ISIS propaganda filmed called 'The Flames of War' which was produced in mid-September 2014. Most of these preachings were shared and followed by JMI members in social media. Not only have some of the JMI and NTJ members supported Zaharan, but some members of Jammath-e-Islami (JeI) Sri Lanka have joined this team and have been involved in the damaging of Buddha statues in Mawanella in December 2019.<sup>8</sup> However, it is yet to be concluded whether JMI is a sub sect of JeI or whether JMI itself operates as a separate organization.

The videos of Zaharan have constantly emphasized the concept of 'us against them' and called on Muslims to wage jihad against the 'kafirs'

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<sup>6</sup> The information was revealed during an interview with security force personnel

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> The information was revealed during an interview with security force personnel.

(nonbelievers). Additionally, Zaharan has also manipulated some of the verses of Islam and preaching's, condemning Muslims living in democratic countries. His rhetoric aligned with ISIS narratives for the establishment of an Islamic State by waging jihad against the crusaders and the kafirs.<sup>9</sup> Hence, even though this splinter group of Zaharan was not directly connected to ISIS, they were inspired by ISIS ideology and the Easter Sunday attacks may have inspired may other likeminded individuals to engage in such kinds of activity under the banner of 'Islam'.

### **Why it is Important to Study the Influence of Daesh in Sri Lanka**

The scholarly work in this field has mainly focused on elaborating the anatomy of Daesh and South Asian terror groups rather than, emphasizing the new trends in their *modus operandi*, propaganda, ideology and financing which have come into play with the emergence of Daesh. In most occasions, the impact of social media and the internet over South Asian terror groups and networks has not been thoroughly researched. Therefore, little knowledge has been accumulated on the structure and the functioning of jihadi groups, particularly in Sri Lanka.

Recently, ISIS embarked on a process of obtaining translators to spread their ideology throughout the world. Among the advertisements, the following link [<http://Khilafahtamil.wordpress.com>] has been identified as a Tamil website consisting of a considerable amount of ISIS related news items.<sup>10</sup> However, these types of communication platforms are a danger to Sri Lanka and India since the majority of Muslims in South India and Sri Lanka are literate in the Tamil language. Hence, it is important to understand the social media *modus operandi* of Daesh which influences the Tamil speaking Muslim population in the Indian sub-continent.

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<sup>9</sup> ibid

<sup>10</sup> ibid

On the other hand, the influence of Daesh on ethno-nationalist/separatist terror groups such as Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and newly emerging politico-religious extremist organizations such as 'Bodu Bala Sena' and 'Sri Lanka Thawheed Jammath' needs to be taken into consideration. It is equally important to understand the effectiveness of a lone wolf strategy and the act of planting sleepers to launch attacks on an unsuspecting populace. Even though martyrdom or suicide bombing is not a new phenomenon in the South Asian region, it is important to identify the Islamic radicalization process and the contribution of Daesh ideology to provoke people to such extent.

This leads to the conclusion that not much research has been conducted to identify the effects of Daesh in post conflict states in South Asia such as Sri Lanka. Moreover, it is also important to analyze the effectiveness of the existing counter terrorism efforts of the South Asian countries when compared with the new trends of terrorism inspired by Daesh in the region.

### **How to Contain ISIS**

Even though ISIS military tactics have succeeded on the ground, the true strength of ISIS is mainly in the Islamic ideology which they have communicated to the whole world. The use of attractive methods to spread the word of Allah shows that the ISIS containment policy of any state should not be limited only to military strategy alone. The US air strikes can only be a tactical strategy and bring tactical advantages but it is necessary to also question whether the foundation of ISIS, which is their 'ideology', could ever be contained by tactical military approaches alone. Therefore, policy makers who try to contain ISIS should take 'counter narration' seriously.

Hence, while continuing with military strategies to contain ISIS, there should be a long term strategy to restrict the spread of the ideology contain the ideology which is rapidly spreading though websites

and social media. In fact, one recommendation is to use the ISIS strategy in a reverse direction to contain their influence. As they use video clips, social media etc. to provoke brutality, policy makers can use the same instruments to spread pacifist Islamic thought. They can also include tribal education (especially Sunni and Shi'a religious traditions) into religious school text books to provide a basic understanding of the differences and similarities of the two traditions. This would assist in establishing peaceful co-existence through education within the Muslim community and also with 'religious others'. By doing so, the awareness of religious diversity will be enhanced.

### **Conclusion**

ISIS has rapidly gained popularity in the jihadist hemisphere as a ruthless terrorist organization influencing the socio-political situation of diverse societies. With the rapid expansion of ISIS ideology, South Asia has also been contaminated by the propaganda activities of ISIS, and the Easter Sunday attacks is a manifestation of this. ISIS bases itself more on exclusivist ideologies of Islam than 'inclusivist' perceptions since they follow Salafi Takfirism mixed with their own interpretation of Islam. However, it is questionable whether the usage of military strategy and engagement is sufficient to counter the spread of ISIS. Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka highlights the danger of ISIS propaganda and how individuals like Zaharan have been inspired by such an ideology. As a matter of fact, there are other security concerns, such as lone-wolf terror attacks and politico-religious clashes. Within such a context, it is necessary to evaluate the existing counter terrorism strategy of Sri Lanka since the 'enemy' is not easily detectable. Hence, this essay argues that in order to contain the threat of ISIS in Sri Lanka and around the world, a long term plan of counter narration combined with a military strategy is essential and appropriate.



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