The Sri Lanka Jihadist (ISIS?) Attacks: How Real the Change?

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How important are the Sri Lanka bombings for ISIS’s revival?

The magnitude and complexity of the Sri Lanka April 21, 2019 bombings in churches and luxury hotels across the country, by an obscure local jihadi (?) group, National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ), have immediately raised the question, in the country and in the international arena, if this is not actually a campaign by the defeated ISIS, and a strong sign of its global revival.

Indeed, on April 23, ISIS has officially claimed responsibility for the Sri Lanka attacks via its Amaq news agency by releasing a video of the Sri Lanka suicide bombers pledging allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr Baghdadi. Issue 179 of the Islamic State weekly Al-Naba', released online on April 25, 2019, highlighted the Sri Lanka attacks, praising its perpetrators and presenting it as a fulfillment of ISIS’s threat to the "Crusaders."

Finally, on April 29, the Islamic State released a rare video in which its leader Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi has made his first appearance in nearly five years. In the only audio portion of this video, a short footage depicts the Sri Lanka attackers pledging allegiance to IS and scenes of the aftermath of the attacks. Al-Baghdadi’s voice says: "You brothers in Sri Lanka have pleased the monotheists by their commando operations that unsettled the Crusaders [including some Americans and Europeans] in their Easter celebration to avenge their brothers in Baghuz.” He highlighted the “high number of casualties from among the Crusaders.”

This paper will describe in detail the sequence of events in Sri Lanka, the known information about the groups involved and the main figures behind the suicide bombings and what is known about the participation of Sri Lankan jihadists in the ranks of ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

However, several points should be stressed, which should mitigate the impact of this major terrorist event and put it in its real proportions.

The most important is the fact that the success of the terrorist massacres is not only the result of the professionalism of the terrorists, as much as of the incredible intelligence and operational blunder, one could even call it criminal negligence, of the Sri Lankan political and security authorities.
The participation of several dozen Sri Lankan Muslim citizens in the civil war in Syria in the ranks of ISIS was known since 2015/16; those who returned were also known; Muslim moderate leaders have for years asked the authorities to stop the violent activities and propaganda of NTJ and its leader; and in January 2019 a training camp of ISIS members was raided by the police, four people, among them an imam, were arrested and great quantities of explosives were found.

More importantly, the Indian authorities, which followed closely some of the jihadi militants involved on the two sides of the maritime frontier, provided Sri Lankan security agencies, since April 4, important and exact intelligence about the planned operation and many of the figures involved in the attacks.

Since the end of the conflict between the majority Sinhalese government with the Tamil minority and the total defat of the LTTE (The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) guerilla and terrorist organization ten years ago, the country lived in an atmosphere of peace, one could say recklessness, not taking serious note of the new violent environment, between the majority Buddhist Sinhalese and the Muslim minority.

One of the main questions is, indeed, why the Christian holy places were attacked and not the Buddhist, as Muslims in Sri Lanka have been attacked since 2014 by radical nationalist Buddhist groups. This could be the result of the ISIS influence, the effect of the recent massacre of Muslims in mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, or perhaps the facility to attack soft belly targets which were not really protected by the authorities.

In the view of this author, with all due proportion, the Sri Lanka events resemble the August, 17, 2017 attacks by a group of young Spanish jihadists of Moroccan origin, under the leadership of the local imam Abdelbaki Es Satty, against civilians in the cities of Barcelona and Cambrils.

Today it is known that their plan was to attack with suicide vests the famous church Sagrada Familia in Barcelona and the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Because the accidental explosion of some 100 canisters of gas and self-prepared explosives intended for the attacks, the death of the imam and three accomplices, they decided to use ramming cars and knives instead.
In this case, like in Sri Lanka, the Spanish law enforcement and security authorities, after 13 years of very successful fight against the jihadi threat in Spain, following the major terrorist attack against the Madrid Atocha trains, forgot to follow the rules. The imam Es Satty was linked to a group of al-Qaeda jihadists arrested in 2006, accused of recruiting youths to be sent to Iraq; he was in jail for four years for hashish trafficking; there was information connecting him with jihadists in Belgium. The lack of cooperation between the prison authorities and the police and intelligence agencies, between the central Spanish police and the Catalan one, and finally the lack of cooperation with the Guardia Civil in the investigation of the explosion, led to the fatal end.

If the Sri Lankan authorities would have acted according to the intelligence in their possession, today we probably wouldn’t speak about the attacks and Baghdadi had nothing to use in his propaganda video. His discourse seems more as an explanation for his supporters of the organization’s dire situation after the fall of its last stronghold in Syria, Baghouz. The real practical success of ISIS has been its survival underground in Iraq, the relocation in Afghanistan/Khorasan and the penetration in the Sahel and Central Africa.

The investigation of the attacks in Sri Lanka should bring answers to two main questions in order to evaluate how deep the ISIS influence on the local jihadi infrastructure:

- Who was responsible for the preparation of the suicide bombing devices, a local terrorist trained in Syria or elsewhere or an expert of ISIS sent by the organization to support the attacks?
- Was the bombing campaign a local initiative and the decision to pay allegiance to ISIS happened during the preparations for the attacks or the timing and the planning were proposed by ISIS?

**The sequence of attacks (21-28 April)**

In the morning of April 21, 2019, seven suicide bombers conducted attacks against the St. Anthony’s Church in Colombo, St Sebastian’s Church in the western coastal town of Negombo and another church in the eastern town of Batticaloa, in Sri Lanka, as well as three luxury hotels in the capital Colombo, the Shangri-La, the Cinnamon Grand, and the Kingsbury.
Attacks were carried out by single bombers, but two men targeted the Shangri-La Hotel in Colombo. One of the explosions was at a housing complex in the Dematagoda suburb of Colombo, where police engaged in a firefight with suspected terrorists. Police reportedly found explosives in at least one apartment, which may have been where the attacks were planned. Three police officers were killed when an improvised explosive device was detonated by one of the suspects. In all, eight or 10 or 12 men seem to have been involved in the attacks.

An improvised explosive device packed inside a six-foot PVC pipe was discovered near the road leading to Sri Lanka’s Bandaranaike International Airport and defused by authorities.¹ The attacks clearly targeted Christians celebrating the culmination of the holiest week in the Christian calendar, as well as tourists staying in Western hotels.

The following day, April 22, an explosion went off in a van near a church in Colombo, when bomb squad officials were trying to defuse three bombs found in it. Sri Lankan police also found 87 bomb detonators at the main bus station in Colombo.

On April 23, ISIS has officially claimed responsibility for the Sri Lanka attacks via its Amaq news agency. It released a video of the Sri Lanka suicide bombers pledging allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr Baghdadi. Even before the formal claim of responsibility IS supporters circulated various pics to celebrate #SriLankaAttacks on various social media forums.²

Supporters of ISIS have taken to Telegram to celebrate. A Kashmiri pro-ISIS channel mentioned a poster that had been released on April 20, one day before the attacks, by the pro-ISIS Indonesian media outlet Ash-Shaff Foundation. The poster, showing a hooded man standing in front of the Notre Dame cathedral in Paris with a text threatening "lone wolf attacks" in "Crusader" churches, seems to be a reaction to the April 15, 2019 Notre Dame fire. The Kashmiri channel, however, associated it with the Sri Lanka bombings, writing in English: "As-Shaff foundation (Pro Islamic State

¹ The first analysis of the Sri Lankan events was posted by this author on his Facebook page on April 22 under the title “A First Take on the Terrorist Attacks in Sri Lanka.” See also at http://www.ict.org.il/Article/2379/A_first_take_on_the_terrorist_attacks_in_Sri_Lanka#gsc.tab=0
Media) had released a poster yesterday threatening of attacks and bloodshed in churches. And today three churches were attacked in Sri-Lanka, there is a possibility that Islamic State lonewolves executed this attack, but there is no claim from the official Islamic State sources.”

Another pro-ISIS channel, Hamlat Fadh Al-Mukhabarat (The Campaign to Expose Intelligence Agents), published a gruesome photo of the carnage in one of the churches, with the Arabic text: "Preliminary photos of the celebration that was held today in the churches of Sri Lanka. We in turn congratulate them on this beautiful, festive day and ask Allah to repeat it on many days and for extended periods.”

April 24: Sri Lanka’s Special Task Force in the Katana area successfully defused an explosive device. The region, some 6.7 kilometres from Katuwapitiya, was the scene of one of the Easter Sunday attacks. Police also attempted to defuse a second bomb before it detonated in Pettah, a neighborhood in Colombo. The device was attached to an unattended motorcycle. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison confirmed links between a local Sri Lankan organization and “support being provided including the targets of these attacks” by the Islamic State network.

April 25: Sri Lankan authorities have revised the death toll from Easter Sunday’s string of bombings down to 253 people from the previous estimate of 359. The country’s director general for health services issued the correction citing the difficulty of identifying victims due to the nature of the bombings, some of which took place in closely confined spaces and left some bodies in pieces.

April 25: A minor explosion occurred in the town of Pugoda, about 40km east of the capital Colombo, according to police and residents. No casualties were reported in the blast near a magistrates’ court.

Issue 179 of the Islamic State (ISIS) weekly Al-Naba’, released online on April 25, 2019, highlighted the April 21 Sri Lanka attacks, praising its perpetrators and presenting it as a fulfillment of ISIS’s threat to the "Crusaders." The issue’s cover highlights the high number of victims in the attacks: "The Islamic State carries out its threat by killing and wounding around 1,000 Crusaders in Sri Lanka." The accompanying article notes that over 350 people were killed and nearly 650 others were

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3 Telegram.me/xcptz, April 21, 2019.
4 Telegram.me/ Hamlat Fadh Al-Mukhabarat, April 21, 2019.
wounded in the "blessed attacks." It notes the number of foreigners killed, saying that over 45 people were killed from the U.S., UK, Australia, the Netherlands, Spain, France, China, and India.\(^5\)

On the **night of April 25/26**, Sri Lankan security forces led a raid against a suspected safe house near the town of Sammanthurai, in Eastern Sri Lanka, where militants detonated three explosions and opened fire. In the morning police found 15 bodies, including six children. Maj. Gen. Aruna Jayasekara, the local military commander, said soldiers and police waited until daylight to carry out further raids in Eastern Province given houses being built close together. They had recovered explosives, detonators, "suicide kits," drones, military uniforms and Islamic State flags. In the same area officers acting on intelligence found 150 sticks of blasting gelatin and 100,000 small metal balls, as well as a van and clothing suspected to be used by those involved in the Easter attack.\(^6\)

The father and two brothers of Zahran Hashim, the suspected mastermind of Sri Lanka’s Easter Sunday bombings, were killed when security forces stormed their safe house. They were among at least 15 killed in the fierce gun battle. The brother Rilwan, who has a damaged eye and badly disfigured hand, had recently been injured while making a bomb.

Police in the eastern town of Kattankudy raided a mosque founded by Zahran which doubled up as the headquarters of his group, the National Thawheedh Jamaath (NTJ). Detectives had also arrested the group’s second-in-command and said the militants’ military training was provided by “Army Mohideen” and weapons training had taken place overseas and at some locations in Sri Lanka’s Eastern province.\(^7\)

At the same time, troops at Nintavur detected a brand-new unregistered van, suspected to be belonging to the National Towheed Jamat’s leader brother-in-law, named Niyas. Following detection of two ID cards, initial reports confirmed the said van had been bought on cash on 19 April.

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\(^5\) “ISIS Weekly Al-Naba’ Praises Sri Lanka Attacks, Portrays It as Fulfillment of ISIS’s Threat Against 'Crusaders’”, *MEMRI Special Dispatch*, No. 8031, April 29, 2019.


\(^7\) Ben Farmer and Qadijah Irshad, “15 bodies found after gun battle between Sri Lankan military and Easter bombing suspects,” *The Telegraph*, 27 April 2019.
Police also arrested during a search operation a man with 46 swords in the Slave Island area of Central Colombo. The swords were found hidden under the bed of the Moulavi of the Kadal Jumma Mosque near the Defence College. In addition to the swords, a suicide west without explosives was found in the same mosque. Meanwhile, 20 camouflage military uniforms were recovered from another mosque in Kollupitiya, near Temple Trees, the official residence of the Sri Lankan Prime Minister, The Island daily reported. In Erakandy in Trincomalee district, police have arrested a person with 51 water gel explosive sticks and 215 detonators.

The Police Special Task Force, The Intelligence Services Operations Centre and the Police Organized Crimes Division raided a home in Dematagoda beside the one in which explosions took place on April 21. During the raid, Police arrested the elder brother of the terrorists who attacked the Shangri-La and Cinnamon Grand Hotels. The terrorists’ father has also been arrested on charges of aiding and abetting terrorist attacks. During the raid, the suspect named Mohammed Ibrahim Mohammed Ifran was arrested while in possession of a German-made air rifle and two swords.

**On April 27,** Sri Lankan President has taken steps to ban the National Thawheed Jamaath (NTJ) and Jamathei Millathu Ibraheem (JMI). “All activities of those organizations as well as their property will be seized by the government...Steps are taken to ban other extremist organizations operating in Sri Lanka, under Emergency Regulations,” the release said. 8 State Defense Minister Ruwan Wijeywardene notes that instructions have been issued to track down and arrest individuals connected to NTJ and JMI, which have been banned.

**April 28:** Sri Lankan forces have killed or arrested most of those linked to the Easter suicide bombings and the country is ready to return to normality, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said. The bombings were carried out by a "small, but a well-organised group", Wickremesinghe said. But the prime minister said the government had planned tougher laws to deal with "extremists" and foreign clerics teaching in Sri Lanka illegally will be expelled.9

**On April 29, 2019,** Al-Furqan, one of the media arms of the Islamic State (ISIS), released a video featuring ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, calling on his fighters to carry out attacks against France,

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8 “Lankan President to ban National Thawheed Jamaath (NTJ) and Jamathei Millathu Ibraheem (JMI),” *NewsIn.Asia,* April 27, 2019.
9 Emily Schmall, Jon Gambrell and Bharatha Mallawarachl, “Sri Lanka police report
its allies, and Saudi Arabia. The video featured a voice message by Al-Baghdadi in which he praised the attacks in Sri Lanka, saying they were revenge for those killed in Al-Bagouz, IS last territorial stronghold in Syria. He said the attack was "a fraction of the revenge awaiting the Crusaders and their tails with the permission of Allah. Blessing due to Allah that among those killed were Americans and Europeans."¹⁰

President Maithripala Sirisena has banned all kinds of face coverings that may conceal people's identities. The law did not specifically name veils worn by many Muslim women.

The organizations behind the attacks

National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ - National Monotheism Organisation) is a radical Sri Lankan jihadist group believed to have split from another hardline Islamist group, the Sri Lanka Thawheed Jamaat (SLTJ). While still relatively unknown, the SLTJ is a bit more established. Its secretary, Abdul Razik, was arrested in 2016 for inciting hatred against Buddhists. He later issued an apology. SLTJ has condemned April 21 "the reprehensible acts of violence" in the country.¹¹

The NTJ and SLTJ are different splinter groups of Thowheed Jamaat of Sri Lanka which allegedly originated from the Thowheed Jamaat of Tamil Nadu, believing in radical Wahhabi Islam and Jihad. NTJ has found traction in country's eastern province and has been pursuing a vigorous campaign constructing mosques for spreading its radical ideology, to introduce Sharia law and burqas for women. NTJ’s extremist ideology and hateful rhetoric led to a backlash from the Buddhist majority which resulted in Buddhist-Muslim riots last year in April. The group was also involved in the vandalism of Buddhist statues. NTJ’s chief Muhammad Zaharan Hashmi came into prominence in 2013 for his incendiary speeches on social media (Khaleej Times, April 23).¹²

¹¹ National Thawheed Jamaat: All you need to know about Sri Lankan terror group, Timesofindia.Com, April 23, 2019.
¹² Abhinav Pandya, Jihadi Terror Enters Sri Lanka, Vivekananda International Foundation, April 25 , 2019
According to Indian sources, there are strong linkages between the Islamic extremist groups of Sri Lanka and the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Vicky Nanjappa of India’s online media platform ‘One India’, and a keen observer of South Asia’s terrorism-scene, has written several reports on the activities of ISI to establish a strong base in Sri Lanka, through Islamic extremist organizations with a view to destabilizing Southern India. DNA India has also reported that ISI has been involved in funding NTJ and using Idara Khidmat-e-Khalq as a proxy to radicalize unemployed youth in Sri Lanka and motivate them to join NTJ (DNA India, April 23).\(^\text{13}\)

Ameer, who is a key personality among the Sufis of the nearby all-Muslim town of Kathankudy, said: “People had participated in demonstrations against the Zahran’s Tawheed Jamaat and its propaganda. I, along with 12 others, had filed a case against Zahran seeking a ban on his activities in 2017. I had met Ministry of Defense officials in Colombo with recordings of Zahran’s speeches and the literature he had produced. But all to no avail.” Mohamed Shoib, a political commentator and a media advisor to Commerce Minister Rishad Bathiudeen said that as recently as January of this year, the All Ceylon Jamiaythul Ulema (ACJU) had complained to the Defense Ministry about the activities of Zahran’s Tawheed Jamaat, through the good offices of the Governor of the Western Province, Asad Sally. But again, to no avail.\(^\text{14}\)

The Jamathei Millathu Ibraheem (JMI) is but an adjunct of the NTJ and was used by the latter when required by the NTJ leader. According to H.M.Ameer, head of the Abdul Jawad Ali Waliullah Trust in Kathankudi, the JMI is based in Kathankudi, the all-Muslim town in Eastern Sri Lanka. Zaran too was based in Kathankudi before he disappeared following the December 2018 attacks on Buddha statues in Mawanella in the Central Province, probably by the JMI. The JMI has been a shadowy organization and therefore very little is known about it, Ameer added.\(^\text{15}\)

Informed sources said that the JMI of Sri Lanka should not be confused with the Jamaat ul Mujahideen India (JMI). The Indian JMI had nothing to do with Zahran and his JMI in Sri Lanka.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{13}\) Ibid.

\(^{14}\) NewsIn.Asia, April 27, 2019.

\(^{15}\) NewsIn.Asia, April 27, 2019.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
Who were the bombers?

*Islamist preacher Zahran Hashim* is suspected of being the bombers' ringleader. He seems to have adopted the IS nom de guerre ‘Abu Ubaida’ and participated in the attacks personally as one of the two suicide bombers who targeted the Shangri-La Hotel. An IS video that was released after the group said it had carried out the attacks features him prominently. In the video, he can reportedly be seen pledging allegiance to the group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Mohammed Zahran Mohomed Hashim was born in the Muslim coastal town of Kattankudy in 1985. In recent times, many Kattankudy residents have sought employment in the Middle-East. This has resulted in increased Islamisation of the Wahabi variety. Kattankudy has more than 60 registered and unregistered mosques. Except for a handful, most of them are in practice influenced by Wahabi ideology.¹⁷

He was the eldest of five children. Following Zahran were two brothers Zeyin and Rilwan. The youngest two were sisters Madaniya and Yaseera.

Zahran was 12 years old when he began his studies at the Jamiathul Falah Arabic College. Zahran and his four brothers and sisters squeezed into a two-room house with their parents in a small seaside town in eastern Sri Lanka; their father was a poor man who sold packets of food on the street and had a reputation for being a petty thief. The boy surprised the school with his sharp mind. For three years, Zahran practiced memorizing the Koran. Next came his studies in Islamic law. But the more he learned, the more Zahran argued that his teachers were too liberal in their reading of the holy book, so he was kicked out from the college.

For much of his adult life, Zahran courted controversy inside the Muslim community. After being ejected from the Madrassa, he was active in Sri Lanka Tawheed Jamaat. Active on the Internet he released online videos calling for jihad and threatening bloodshed.

But Zahran with his ultra-radical views was soon at loggerheads with SLTJ. He then formed his own organization, the National Tawheed Jamaat (NJT). Hashim was a very powerful orator in Tamil and

He became a popular figure in Kattankudy. Furthermore, he was invited by Muslim devotees in different parts of the island to conduct religious lectures. He opened a Tamil website for NJT and propagated his viewpoint. This attracted many in Tamil Nadu as well as those from Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu who were working in the Gulf countries. He later operated a Facebook account on the same lines. Soon donations began to pour in. The NJT Mosque was now housed in a modern building at New Kattankudy. Zahran Hashim also travelled around the country enrolling members for NJT, which at one time had about 600 full-fledged members and 4,500 associate members. It is said that he travelled to Tamil Nadu, the Maldives and some Middle-Eastern countries to conduct meetings with expatriate workers from Sri Lanka and India. NTJ began to grow in strength and influence. Still Zahran Hashim was virtually unknown outside segments of Muslim society in Sri Lanka and India.

After spending some time in Sri Lanka, Zahran relocated to India where he began interacting with Muslim extremist groups in the South Indian States of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. His sojourns were mostly in the Malappuram District of Kerala and the Coimbatore. Trichy, Thirunelvely, Vellore, Nagapattinam. Kanniyakumari and Ramanathapuram Districts of Tamil Nadu. All these districts have sizeable Muslim populations. He openly advocated the IS cause in these places and canvassed for volunteers to join the fighting forces of IS. It is during this time that Zahran came to the attention of Indian intelligence services. It was during his lengthy stay in India that Zahran Hashim changed, from a radical activist propagating fundamental Islamic ideology and eulogising the Islamic State, into an exponent of armed militancy and practitioner of violence. He decided to return to Sri Lanka and engage in violence for what he thought was the cause of Islam.

The precise relationship between Zahran and Islamic State is not yet known. An official with India’s security services, said that during a raid in Tamil Nadu on a suspected Islamic State cell by the National Investigation Agency earlier this year, officers found copies of Zahran’s videos.18

*The father, Mohamed Hashim, and two brothers of Zahran Hashim, Zainee Hashim and Rilwan Hashim, were killed when security forces stormed their safe house in Sammanthurai. The three appear in a video circulating on social media calling for all-out war against non-believers. They died along with a child that appears in the video, probably shot in the same house where the gun battle took place.*

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18 ‘Black sheep’: The mastermind of Sri Lanka’s Easter Sunday bombs,” *Reuters*, April 26, 2019
Ilham Ahmed Mohamed Ibrahim bombed the Shangri-La hotel together with Zahran Hashim. Ilham's elder brother Inshaf Ahmed was the man who bombing the nearby Cinnamon Grand hotel. The two were the sons of spice trader Mohammad Yusuf Ibrahim who is based in the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo. Shortly after the hotel bomb attacks, Fathima Ilham, the wife of Ilham, blasted explosives strapped to herself, killing her two children and three police officers who rushed to the family home in Colombo. The father has been arrested and is in custody. 19

A man identified as Mohamed Azzam Mubarak Mohamed bombed the third hotel, the Kingsbury. The St. Anthony's Church was targeted by a local resident named Ahmed Muaz. His brother has been arrested. The St. Sebastian bomber was Mohamed Hasthun, a resident from the island's east where Hashim was based. The Christian Zion church in the eastern district of Batticaloa was hit by a local resident, Mohamed Nasser Mohamed Asad.

Abdul Latif Jamil Mohammed reportedly tried to blow up the luxury Taj Samudra hotel in Colombo but he botched his attempt to detonate his bomb and instead blew himself up by accident at a smaller guest house, killing one tourist. Abdul Latif visited south-east England in 2006/7 to study but did not complete a full university degree. He reportedly studied aerospace engineering at Kingston University. He later studied in Australia before returning to Sri Lanka. Abdul Latif had family living in New Zealand, with his sister and mother residing in Auckland. His sister told the media that her brother became radicalized in Australia. 20 "He was really angry with the US and its alliance's attacks in Iraq during his stay in Australia," a close friend told Reuters. Jameel attempted to travel to Syria in 2014 with a friend, but only got as far as Turkey before turning back for an unknown reason, according to the Sri Lankan intelligence source. The friend later joined IS's health service in Syria. 21 Early reports suggest that two of the suspects involved in the Sri Lanka attacks had travelled to Iraq and Syria.

Sri Lanka's prime minister said that suspects linked to the coordinated Easter Sunday bomb attacks remain at large and could have access to explosives. Police seek public assistance to arrest six suspects, including three women, wanted for their involvement in the attacks.

Sri Lankan police is looking for 140 people with links to ISIS, according to President Sirisena. Some Sri Lankan youth had been involved with the group since 2013.

The bombers were wealthy enough to have financed the entire operation themselves, though they would have needed outside help for training and bomb-building expertise, PM Wickremesinghe said.

**It was written on the wall: alerts previous the attacks**

Sri Lanka's police chief Pujuth Jayasundara made a nationwide alert 10 days before April 21 bomb attacks, that suicide bombers planned to hit "prominent churches". "A foreign intelligence agency has reported that the NTJ is planning to carry out suicide attacks targeting prominent churches as well as the Indian high commission in Colombo," said the alert.

The prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, said security services had been “aware of information” of a possible attack up to 10 days ago, and the government “must look into why adequate precautions were not taken”. The health minister said authorities were warned two weeks before
the attacks, and had the names of attackers, but this information was not shared with prime minister Wickremesinghe. The president, Maithripala Sirisena, has the portfolio of defense.

April 29: Sri Lanka’s incumbent police chief Pujith Jayasundara has refused to step down over the Easter attacks despite President Sirisena naming Deputy Inspector-General Chandana Wickramaratne as acting police chief.

Anne Speckhard, Director of the International Center for Violent Extremism, told the Khaleej Times that a Sri Lankan intelligence official had expressed his apprehensions about the activities of NTJ in February this year at a conference (Khaleej Times, April 23). According to Anne, the intelligence official was worried about the fact that whenever the agencies attempted to act against the group, it met with opposition.

**Sri Lankan jihadists in the ranks of ISIS**

By the end of 2015, two foreign governments warned the Sri Lankan authorities of the radicalization of Muslim groups turning out to be supporters of ISIS. The Government has learnt that 45 Sri Lankans from nine families have entered Syria through Turkey. Some had even transited in Pakistan to cover their trail. Whilst some were engaged in combat roles, others were said to be deployed in logistical tasks.

Contrary to the popular belief that ISIS supporters were among minority Muslim groups from the Eastern Province, the report has noted that the groups were from Kurunegala, Kandy and the Colombo suburbs of Kolonnawa and Dehiwala.

In November 2015, the Islamic State, in its English mouthpiece Dabiq, revealed the identity of its first Sri Lankan fighter killed in Syria, Mohamed Muhsin Sharfaz Nilam, known by his nom de guerre Abu Shurayh al-Silani, who was killed in July 2015 in Raqqa in an air strike. According to the Dabiq article, Sharfaz Nilam travelled to Syria along with 16 others including his parents, wife and his six children.

By 2017, scores of known Sri Lankan ISIS fighters had returned from Syria, and there was a subsequent spike in jihadist activity throughout Sri Lanka.
In August 2018, an affluent postgraduate student from Sri Lanka named Mohamed Nizamdeen, who was studying in Australia, was charged with ISIS-affiliated terror-related offences while plotting to assassinate Australian politicians. This case was widely publicized because Nizamdeen is the nephew of MP Faiszer Mustapha, a cabinet minister in the Sri Lankan government and the grandson of the late former Chairman of the Bank of Ceylon. His terror-related charges were later dropped, in a surprising move by the Australian authorities.

On January 17, 2019, an elite unit of Sri Lankan police commandos raided a remote compound operated by Islamic jihadis near the Wilpattu National Park wildlife sanctuary, where suspects were known to be hiding. Four suspects were found in possession of some 100 kilos of explosives and 100 detonators. The suspects including the owner of the land, where some of the explosives were buried, were arrested. The explosives seizure has thwarted a significant Islamic terror attack in Sri Lanka: the terrorists were planning to destroy sacred Buddhist shrines in the ancient city of Anuradhapura with C4 high explosives. The discovery was made during investigations into hate attacks against Buddha statues elsewhere in the country in an apparent attempt to spark a widespread conflict between majority Buddhists and minority Muslims.

ISIS in South Asia

From early 2015, when it started losing territories, the IS started shifting its strategy from expanding territorially to expanding insurgency and terror. And South Asia has been one of its key targets. In Nangarhar in eastern Afghanistan, the IS set up a wilayat (province) from where it controlled its South Asia operations, mainly recruitment of young men from the region. IS still controls some territory in Afghanistan. The U.S. had declared two years ago that defeating the IS in Afghanistan was one of its main policy goals, but it hasn’t made much progress on the ground.

Over the last few years, the IS has carried out dozens of attacks in Afghanistan, mostly targeting the Shia-Hazara minority. In Pakistan, the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a splinter group of the Pakistan Taliban with IS links, carried out several terror attacks, including the 2016 Easter Sunday bombing in Lahore targeting Christians. In Bangladesh, the IS claimed the July 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack. In India, it hasn’t carried out any attack but has found dozens of recruits.22

22 https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/the-is-shadow/article26946462.ece
The old wisdom that lack of education and poverty breed terrorism doesn’t hold good in the case of the IS. Among the Sri Lankan bombers were some from one of the country’s wealthiest families. Most of those who travelled to Afghanistan’s IS territories from Kerala were from upper middle-class families.

A January 2019 report by The Soufan Center highlighted that Salafi-jihadist groups, including both ISIS and al-Qaeda, have long viewed South Asia as fertile ground to gain new territory and recruits, and their propaganda has highlighted injustices against Muslims in Bangladesh, Myanmar, India, and Sri Lanka.

**The Indian connection**

Indian Central agencies have found that Sri Lanka-based National Towheed Jama’at (NTJ), a Tamil Nadu-based outfit and some people from Kerala were in regular touch for over a year to create a “separate Islamic confederation” in the region. The Tamil Nadu-based organisation doesn’t seem to be involved in Sri Lanka attacks but it was in touch with radical elements, an angle which needs to be probed further. The Indian agencies are also working on a Bangladeshi link to the-IS inspired modules that have tried or are trying to establish a base in south India.23

The National Investigation Agency had claimed last year that over a dozen IS recruits from Tamil Nadu and Kerala had either travelled to Sri Lanka to get radical Islamic lessons before moving to Islamic State-held territory in Nangarhar province (Afghanistan) or were in touch with Maulvi Zahran Bin Hashim, the alleged mastermind of the attacks, for Jihadi activities.

Similarly, the Sri Lanka link was found by NIA in its 33/2016 FIR lodged in Coimbatore. In this case, six IS suspects — Mohammed Ashiq A, Ismail S, Samsudeen, Mohammed Salauddin S, Jafar Shadik Ali and Shahul Hameed have been named. They were in touch with Hashim and videos recovered from them gave a hint to agencies about a big terror plan in Sri Lanka, investigators claimed.

The central agency has so far arrested over 70 IS members since 2014 from different states but maximum number of youngsters influenced by IS ideology are from Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Why the attacks focused on Christian and Western targets?
Over the past few years since 2012, hard line Sinhala groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) meaning “Buddhist Power Force” have been highly vocal in their opposition to the Muslim community. BBS in 2013 opposed the Halal certification of foods followed by the Muslim community and the Muslim dress code “abaya.” It has been advocating a complete boycott of Muslim owned institutions and shops. These anti-Muslim activities culminated in June 2014 during a protest rally organized by BBS in Aluthgama, when 3 Muslims lost their lives and scores of houses and shops belonging to the Muslim community were destroyed.

Moreover, the January 2019 assault on the jihadi training camp in Wanathawilluwa led to the discovery of the plan to blow up sacred Buddhist shrines in the ancient city of Anuradhapura. ISIS had warned in the past that it would target the Buddhists in Sri Lanka.

The Christians are the smaller, 7% minority, in a country were about 70% are ethnic Sinhalese, most of whom are Buddhist, 12% Tamil, mostly Hindus and 10% are Muslims. So why the April attacks focused on Christian and Western targets?
According to a report by SITE Intel group, which monitors jihadi networks and forums, ISIS supporters portrayed the attacks as revenge for strikes on mosques and Muslims in general.

In this author’s evaluation the attacks could be a direct revenge for the massacre in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, by Australian radical right-wing terrorist Brenton Harrison Tarrant. At the time, ISIS spokesman, Abu Hassan al-Muhajir, broke a six-month silence to call on ISIS supporters to “take vengeance for their religion” in a 44-minute audio recording. It is possible also that the churches were considered more soft targets than the Buddhist temples and statues, already under attack by Muslim radicals. Targeting the Sinhala majority would be counterproductive as the retaliation from radical Sinhala groups would be significant. Finally, it could be that this was a directive from ISIS, but for the moment there is no clear link of NTJ to the leadership of the ISIS leadership.

The attacks in Sri Lanka enter also in the line of other jihadi attacks of Christian shrines: the 2000 Christmas Eve bombings in Indonesia by al-Qaeda and Jemmah Islamiyah, attacks by Jamaat-ul-
Ahrar targeting Christians on Easter Sunday in Pakistan or the foiled millennium attempt on the cathedral of Strasburg in France.

The thorough and quick investigation of this massive bloody attack is necessary, in order to permit an evaluation of the possible relocation of ISIS in new areas, like South Asia and Africa, after it failed to proliferate in Europe and the United States.
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