Understanding the Terrorist Attacks in Sri Lanka
(Hint: It’s Not the Islamic State)

Key Takeaways

- The Global War on Terror narrative has hindered counterterrorism strategy by failing to adequately recognize or examine the many ground-level nuances of local insurgencies.
- Radicalization is now defined more by individual relationships and the lateral spread of ideas, as they relate to one’s local environment, than by the top-down propaganda efforts of dominant jihadi brands like al Qaeda or the Islamic State.
- Predicting terrorist incidents earlier in the pipeline requires taking a long view of key economic, cultural, and political trends, and keeping track of a running list of indicators that, when examined in context, create reliable predictors of events like terrorist attacks.
I. The Great Fallacy: Seeing All Terrorism Through the “Global War on Terror” Lens

What Happened in Sri Lanka Highlights a Critical Counterterrorism Challenge

On April 21, 2019, Easter morning, three churches and three luxury hotels in Sri Lanka were targeted in a series of suicide bombings. 258 people were killed, including 46 foreign nationals and three police officers, and at least 500 more were injured in the coordinated attacks. According to government officials, all nine suicide bombers were Sri Lankan citizens associated with National Thowheeth Jama’ath (NTJ), a local militant Islamist group with suspected ties to foreign terrorist organizations. Two days later, on April 23, 2019, the Islamic State took credit for the attacks via its Amaq news agency.

As is common when such spectacular attacks occur, Western security officials, terrorism analysts, and journalists immediately began speculating and looking for an explanation. In the context of Sri Lankan geopolitics, many said, the attack seemingly came out of nowhere: it wasn’t possible that a heretofore unknown local group could pull off six synchronized attacks across the country without help from an international group like the Islamic State.

Though NTJ has emerged as a burgeoning radical Islamist movement with ties to Wahhabi orthodox clerics and activists, the investigation into the strength of the ties between NTJ and the Islamic State remains ongoing. The release of the propaganda video by Amaq - and its subsequent dissemination throughout online jihadi chat rooms - suggests that at least some members of NTJ had direct communication with Islamic State operatives. But, there is, at the time of publication, no proof that the Islamic State provided anything other than inspiration and possibly encouragement to the Easter bombers.

This reality highlights a critical counterterrorism challenge. Since the September 11th terrorist attacks against the United States in 2001, everything contemporary Western analysts think they know about terrorism has been shaped through the lens of al Qaeda. This phenomenon was exacerbated by the United States framing its fight against al Qaeda as the “Global War on Terror,” or GWOT. The concept of the GWOT never adequately examined or explained the many nuances involved in a local insurgent group pledging bayat, or allegiance, to al Qaeda.

What Does Bayat Mean in Practice?

Today, Somalia’s insurgent group al Shabaab is so often referred to as “al Qaeda-linked al Shabaab” that it is likely many people are unaware that bin Laden himself refused to accept al Shabaab into his terrorist network for many years. In fact, it wasn’t until after bin Laden’s death that Ayman al Zawahiri finally accepted al Shabaab’s pledge in February 2012. While individual members of the two groups had relationships going back as far as the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu, formally becoming an al Qaeda affiliate has had little impact on al Shabaab’s day to day operations. The one area where al Qaeda has been influential with al Shabaab is its propaganda, which thanks to al Qaeda now includes mentions of the Palestinian struggle.
One of the dangers of viewing all terrorism through a lens of al Qaeda or the Islamic State is the tendency to overlook the network of personal relationships that drive ties between groups. While the case could be made that al Shabaab and al Qaeda have never had a significant relationship, individual members of both groups have indeed had significant relationships. Sheikh Yusuf al Ayiri, Saif al Adel, and Sheikh Abu al Hasan al Sa’idi, all prominent members of al Qaeda, were reported to be on the battlefield on the day in 1993 in Mogadishu when two US Black Hawk helicopters were shot down.

Sheikh Yusuf al Ayiri was the former leader of al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. He was killed by Saudi security forces in 2003, but before that, he was known to have fought in Chechnya, Bosnia, Kosovo, Sudan, the Philippines, and Afghanistan, in addition to Somalia. Saif al Adel was involved in numerous terror plots, including the 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Sheikh Abu al Hasan al Sa’idi fought against the Soviets in 1989, and later, traveled to Sudan with bin Laden. Regardless of formal affiliation, individual jihadis like these were experienced, battle-hardened world travelers with the global connections to show for it.

After bin Laden’s death, al Qaeda lost much of what was left of its fearsome reputation. The group had become so worn down that the notion of viewing Islamist terrorism through the al-Qaeda-as-a-global-threat lens was beginning to crack. However, the Islamic State, formed from splinter group al Qaeda in Iraq by sectarian extremist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was on the rise and easily slipped in to replace al Qaeda in the GWOT narrative. Just like al Qaeda before it, the Islamic State is only too happy to claim credit for a terrorist attack anywhere in the world, whether it contributed operational and financial support to a local network or whether a small group of locals read one piece of propaganda from Amaq.

Because the Western security apparatus is still largely operating within the GWOT framework of nearly 20 years ago, focused on eliminating the biggest named franchises by targeting their geographic safe havens, often a claim of responsibility from the Islamic State satisfies the collective need for an explanation. Attacks in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Bangladesh have all been claimed by the Islamic State, though that is where the geopolitical similarities end. In part, this is due to the reality that the Islamic State has been especially effective at weaving unrelated threads of sectarian, revolutionary, and anti-imperialist thought into a cohesive jihadist narrative and then disseminating such narrative in its propaganda. By doing this it has managed to appeal to disaffected individuals and marginalized groups in many parts of the world where just about everything else - history, culture, ethnicity, and local context - is different.

*The Limits of a Global Terrorist Brand*

Though any terrorist attack claimed by the Islamic State can pose a similar challenge (or provoke similar missteps) in the response, each jihadist movement, and hence each terrorist attack, notwithstanding any individual’s links to broader jihadist movements, is distinct and locally rooted. While individual relationships can pass knowledge, experience, advice, and even the key to deeper operational support, their significance is essentially in the exchange of ideas. It is easy to look at al Qaeda or the Islamic State and assume that, as the dominant jihadi brands, the simple broadcasting of ideas in a top-down manner is enough to stir recruitment and change the nature of a society. It is not this simple.
Ideas are passed laterally from person to person. Individuals who care enough about an idea choose to spread the word, to talk about it, to insist that others pay attention to it. In each retelling, it is adapted to fit a local narrative and local circumstances. Accordingly, each circumstance requires a counterterrorism response tailored to its specific context. More effort should be made, both by local governments and the Western security apparatus, to disaggregate jihadist movements, rather than further lumping them together as being al Qaeda or Islamic State linked. Persisting with the Islamic-State-as-explanation narrative may provide a shallow level of context and understanding in the short term, but it only serves to obscure the deeper meaning and root causes in the long term, making the prevention and interdiction of such attacks in the future much more complicated.

II. How Radicalization Happens and Why Traditional Approaches to Counterterrorism Don’t Work

Identity Politics and the Radicalization Fast Track

The Sri Lanka attacks remind us that terrorism is driven neither by poverty nor ignorance. Extremists are just as likely to come from wealthy families and to be educated, often in the West, as they are to be impoverished and lacking secular education. They have husbands or wives, children, and parents who love them. This diversity makes it extremely difficult to anticipate who will commit a violent act of terrorism.

Undoubtedly, the Sri Lankan bombers provide an interesting case study. Abdul Lathif Jameel Mohamed, one of the Colombo bombers, studied engineering in Britain. He hailed from a well-off family that made its living trading tea in Sri Lanka’s hill region and that had been planning a family holiday. Brothers Inshaf and Ilham Ibrahim were the sons of a spice tycoon and part of the Sri Lankan elite. Inshaf owned a successful copper factory outside the capital of Colombo. When police came to search the house, Ilham’s pregnant wife Fatima detonated an explosive device, killing herself, her unborn child, her two other children, and three police officers. Extended family members say that Ilham was more devout than others in his family and that, though it was unusual in Sri Lanka, Fatima covered her entire face with a veil. The remaining suicide bombers have also been described as coming from middle to upper middle class families.

Just as socioeconomic status is not a reliable predictor of violence, in the present era it is also extremely difficult to predict whether a perpetrator will act alone or in concert with others. It is just as common to experience a “wolf pack” terrorist attack as it is that of the lone wolf actor, which makes understanding the radicalization process critical. Just as each jihadist movement is distinct and locally rooted, so too is the radicalization process. The timeline of radicalization is getting shorter and the choice of soft targets and weapons is often less predictable than it was in the decade following September 11, 2001. Furthermore, radicalization is an exploitative process, and whether religious or secular, political or apolitical, the process of becoming an extremist can provide clarity and a sense of identity in a turbulent world.

Throughout history, the metrics used to define identity have changed dramatically. In large part, identity is defined by allegiances. In medieval times, a person’s identity was based primarily on his or her religion. In the 19th century, the rise of the nation-state gave way to non-religious
identities, including those based on ethnicity, culture, or nationality. Globalization, especially in the 21st century, has ushered in another shift in how we define identity. With the proliferation of the internet, we find ourselves in what the New York Times has called the “Age of Behavior.” In 2019, identity is defined more by ideas and narratives, rather than by nationality and ethnicity. The internet has made possible this state of hyperconnectivity, where exposure to a new idea or a new culture on the other side of the world is merely a mouse click away. As the exchange of ideas becomes easier and how people define identity becomes more transnational in nature, it is increasingly affecting how they behave. To some degree, this explains both the worldwide trend toward far-right populist movements and the rise of religious intolerance and sectarian tensions.

Ironically, however, as global connectivity proliferates, so too does the breakdown of the social fabric in many societies. Technology and foreign relations are rapidly becoming interchangeable topics, and most world leaders have yet to begin to fully grasp the strategic implications of such boundless connectivity. The distinction between the real and virtual worlds has all but ceased to exist. In an era when a person can be a member of any group virtually, it is increasingly more difficult for people to find a “tribe” in the communities in which they actually live. An individual in search of a sense of identity may become especially vulnerable to the collectivist spirit and sense of belonging that an extremist ideology can provide. An Islamic jihadist narrative, for example, can imbue a sense of purpose and an organized framework that addresses personal and public grievances in a deceptively coherent manner.

The New Narrative of Radicalization

We can no longer rely on a narrative of poverty and lack of opportunity as the prime drivers for jihadist recruitment. Rather, when we focus on those who are experiencing an identity inflection point, we find that sometimes rapid radicalization is the result. Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, perpetrator of the July 2016 Bastille Day attack in France, was a classic case of rapid radicalization. Lahouaiej Bouhlel was a 31 year old Tunisian immigrant living in Nice. He had a wife and three children, although he was not living with them at the time of the attack. Up until the weeks before the attack, he was described as being a non-observant Muslim. He drank and took drugs, ate pork, and liked to lift weights and go salsa dancing. French prosecutor Francois Molins described him as having a “wild” sex life. His own family was concerned that he had mental health issues, and Chamseddine Hamouda, a psychiatrist who assessed Lahouaiej Bouhlel a few years before the Nice attack described him as a “stranger to himself.”

In the weeks leading up to the day he drove a truck into a crowd on Nice’s Promenade des Anglais, killing 86 people and injuring 458, Lahouaiej Bouhlel’s behavior changed completely. He began growing a beard “for religious reasons.” His internet history was full of daily searches for Koranic verses and jihadi propaganda chants known as nasheeds. He researched previous terrorist attacks such as the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris and the Orlando nightclub shooting. He had photos of Osama bin Laden and Mokhtar Belmokhtar on his phone, and showed friends a video of an Islamic State beheading. Investigators never found any links to the Islamic State, but that did not stop the group from claiming credit for the attack. The Amaq News Agency made a statement calling Lahouaiej Bouhlel a soldier of the Islamic State, and saying that he had carried out the attack in response to calls to target nationals of states that are part of the coalition fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.
Constants vs Variables

Given that the targets and methods of terrorist attacks are difficult to predict, that the identity of would-be attackers is even more elusive, and that radicalization is taking place on a much shorter timeline, the challenge of how to prevent attacks like the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka may seem insurmountable. The standard counterterrorism toolkit - designations, financial sanctions, travel bans, and targeted killings - is entirely ineffective against small local communities and family units. Traditional programs for countering violent extremism (CVE) have, more often than not, only served to exacerbate the ethnic and religious divides that are driving radicalization.

Competent, resilient states should form the foundation of efforts to combat extremism, but all too often, viewing jihadist extremism through the Islamic State lens has caused politicians to respond to threats in ways that foster recruitment in the first place: promotion of xenophobia, curtailing of civil liberties, and spouting of divisive racial, ethnic, or political discourse. Under these conditions, most government responses to such jihadist speech tend to focus on symptoms rather than root causes. In this way, governments are, in effect, giving extremist groups exactly what they need to flourish. A small group of people are able to terrorize and control through fear. As a consequence, any jihadist group’s true strength lies more in the geopolitical upheaval it causes, rather than the actual physical destruction and lives lost in a single attack.

III. Radicalization in the Sri Lankan Context

The Wahhabi Moth and the Sri Lankan Flame

In the context of Sri Lanka, the immediate reaction of many experts and analysts was shock that such jihadist violence had reached the small island nation. Upon closer examination, however, a story of slow radicalization building over the course of decades emerges. Ethically and religiously, Sri Lanka is a highly complex country. Of the roughly 22.5 million people in Sri Lanka, the ethnic majority is Sinhalese, making up 74 percent of the population. They are predominantly Buddhist and speak Sinhala. The Tamil community is the second largest ethnic group and is made up of Sri Lankan Tamils (12.6 percent) and Indian Tamils (5.6 percent). This community speaks Tamil and most are Hindu, though there are a significant number of Christian Tamils, the majority of whom are Catholic. Muslims make up about seven percent of the population. They also speak Tamil, but they do not see themselves as ethnically Tamil.

In 1956, Sri Lanka passed the Sinhala Only Act, which made Sinhalese the country’s official language. This was considered discriminatory by the Tamil-speaking population which formed militant groups in response. The tensions boiled over in 1983 during a period of time known as Black July, when Tamil attacks on the Sri Lankan army prompted retaliatory attacks by Sinhalese mobs, leading to as many as 3000 civilian deaths. This was the beginning of Sri Lanka’s civil war. Initially, some Tamil-speaking Muslims sided with the Tamil cause, but Muslims, regardless of their other affiliations, soon became a target as well, with the campaign of violence razing homes, businesses, and mosques. In one prominent attack in 1990, the
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam separatist group raided two mosques in Kattankudy, killing over 150 people.

In the midst of the Tamil rebellion, as has happened in so many other places where Muslims are victimized, Gulf money and Wahhabi missionaries found their way to Sri Lanka and radicalization followed. The strict nature of Wahhabi Islam, a conservative strain that denigrates both non-Muslims and followers of other Islamic sects, quickly fomented clashes between different Muslim groups in Sri Lanka. As far back as 1996, Wahhabist elements in the country’s Muslim east were perpetrating attacks on the Sufi population. Today, most of Kattankudy’s 60 mosques - for a town of around 47,000 people - are Wahhabi. Accordingly, as the nature of Islam in Sri Lanka became more conservative over the last few decades, there were a number of noteworthy events that left a trail of breadcrumbs down the pathway of radicalization that culminated in the Easter attacks. Some of the most significant include:

- In October 2004, a group of 500 Wahhabis organized under the name "Jihad" and began an aggressive campaign of violence against Sufi Muslims, destroying homes, businesses, and religious centers owned by Sufis.
- In December 2006, a group of Wahhabi preachers from the same network incited local clerics and politicians to oppose the burial of an important Sufi cleric, Sheihul Mufliheen M.S.M. Abdullah (also known as Rah) on the basis that he was an apostate. Another Sufi adherent who had died only days earlier was exhumed on the same premise. According to Wahhabis, apostates could not be buried in Kattankudy.
- The Sri Lankan Human Rights Council was petitioned about the burial issue in 2007 but declined to intervene, saying that it could not get involved in a dispute between various sects of a religion.
- In 2007, the International Religious Freedom Report issued by the US Department of State made note of Wahhabi interference with the Sufis in Sri Lanka.
- In 2007, after hosting a roundtable discussion with prominent Muslim leaders, the US Ambassador to Colombo, Robert O. Blake, sent a cable to Washington that expressed deep concern over the growing influence of Wahhabism and the risk of further radicalization, particularly in Kattankudy.
- In 2008, after a visit to Sri Lanka, Asma Jahangir, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, noted in her 2008 Report that the government of Sri Lanka was not fulfilling its obligation to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief of all its citizens.
- In 2009, after the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka, local papers reported a substantial influx of Wahhabi preachers and activists from South India and Saudi Arabia.
- In 2012 and 2013 there was a dramatic rise in Islamophobia and an increase in attacks on Muslims across Sri Lanka. This led to anti-Muslim riots in southwestern Sri Lanka in June 2014, in which at least four people were killed and 80 injured. Hundreds were made homeless following attacks on homes, shops, factories, mosques, and a nursery, and 10,000 more were displaced by the violence.
- In 2014, a group called the “Peace Loving Moderate Muslims in Sri Lanka” published a statement in the local Daily Mirror newspaper denouncing the NTJ and warning that it
was “fast becoming a cancer” within Sri Lanka’s Muslim community. The statement warned that members of the group were making mosque attendance compulsory, forcing a strict implementation of Islamic law above Sri Lankan law, and forcing women to cover their faces and wear long robes in place of traditional saris.

- In February 2018, Buddhist mobs in central Sri Lanka burned down dozens of Muslim shops, homes, and places of worship. The riots were triggered by a road rage incident that resulted in several Muslim men beating up a Sinhala truck driver who later died in the hospital. While there was no indication the driver was attacked because of his ethnicity, a rash of posts and videos on social media sites by anti-Muslim crusaders exploited the incident to call for violence. This incident typifies the anti-Muslim rhetoric that is still rampant in Sri Lanka. Other examples include a rumor that a Muslim-owned restaurant was spiking its food with sterilization pills in an attempt to become the majority group in Sri Lanka. Similar rumors told of Muslim-owned clothing stores that put sterilization gel in undergarments meant for Sinhalese women for the same reason.

- Muslim elders in the town of Kattankudy warned Sri Lankan authorities several times in recent years about the violent extremism preached by Zaharan Hashim, the suspected mastermind of the Easter bombings, who routinely called for the slaughter of nonbelievers.

- In December 2018, the NTJ gave the first indications that its targets may be shifting away from other Muslim sects to non-Muslims when Buddhist and Christian statues were vandalized in the central town of Mawanella.

- In January 2019, while investigating attacks on statues of the Buddha by suspected Islamist radicals, police discovered 220 pounds of explosives and 100 detonators hidden in a coconut grove near the Wilpattu national park.

Adjusting the Counterterrorism Viewfinder

Predicting the Easter attacks in Sri Lanka earlier in the pipeline would have required more than gleaning snippets of terrorist chatter about an impending attack on a church. It would have required more than a State Department cable sent after a roundtable discussion with community leaders about the growing Wahhabi influence in the Muslim community that, they feared, could lead to radicalization. It would have required one organization keeping track of all of these things, while also watching key economic, cultural, and political trends, speaking to people on the ground in Sri Lanka, and keeping track of a running list of potential indicators. Though individual indicators may not be meaningful, when presented together with a host of other indicators, they may create reliable predictors of geopolitically tumultuous events like terrorist attacks.

Prior to April 21, 2019, it would not necessarily have made sense to predict that there would be an Islamic State attack in Sri Lanka. But, if the correct indicators of extremist activity were being tracked, it would have been possible to predict that there would be, at some point, a terrorist attack perpetrated by a Wahhabi group on Christian or Western interests in the country. This kind of awareness could have made all the difference to the albeit-fractious government of Sri Lanka, which might have received warnings from foreign intelligence services with an entirely different level of concern, had they truly been considering the possibility.
IV. The Role of Intelligence Agencies

Understanding and Moving Beyond Intelligence Limitations

Why do we continue to have intelligence failures of this magnitude? And why do analysts and experts so often fail to predict incidents like the Easter attacks? One reason for ongoing intelligence failures is the reality that increasing the sophistication of intelligence collection efforts doesn’t directly translate to better outcomes. Overall, intelligence agencies are effective when it comes to collecting and analyzing the specific types of intelligence they are tasked with tracking, but there are still a number of flaws in the system. Intelligence agencies, despite renewed emphasis in the United States since September 11, 2001, are still not very good at sharing information. The types of intelligence and the way we collect them has changed, but not for the better, with an overreliance on technological sources at the expense of human sources. At the CIA, the predominant civilian organization responsible for human intelligence, significant shifts in the directorate of operations in the years leading up to the September 11th attacks severely hampered collection efforts abroad.

The Sri Lanka Example

In April, it didn’t take long for information to emerge indicating that Sri Lanka had failed to act on a number of detailed warnings that might have mitigated, if not prevented, the Easter attacks. According to Rajitha Senaratne, a government spokesman, on April 4, both Indian and United States intelligence agencies relayed to Sri Lankan officials information on a potential plot to target Christian churches and tourist locations with suicide attacks. On April 9, Sri Lanka’s Defense Ministry informed the Inspector General of Police of the plot, and named NTJ as the group believed to be behind the plan. Notably, the memo included a list of suspects. A second memo illustrating the threat and listing the suspects, signed by the Deputy Inspector General of Police Priyalal Dissanayake was circulated widely to security services and government ministries on April 11. Foreign intelligence services repeated their warnings in the days leading up to the attacks, including one warning reported to come a mere 10 minutes before the first bomb detonated.

Many have blamed an ongoing feud in the government of Sri Lanka for the failure to act on warnings about an impending terrorist attack. Political divides deepened last year during a constitutional crisis that developed when President Maithripala Sirisena attempted to replace the incumbent Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, with a favored candidate. Wickremesinghe was reinstated in December after the Supreme Court intervened, but the government remains deeply divided. Senaratne reported that, even after the Easter attacks, members of Sri Lanka’s national security council refused to attend a meeting called by the Prime Minister.
Another change has dramatically impacted the US intelligence community’s ability to distinguish the indicators and emerging macro patterns that would have shed light on the radicalization of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka years ahead of the specific intelligence warning that pertained to the Easter attacks. Today, it is unusual for an analyst or officer to work on any single topic or region long enough to really learn it inside and out. In previous eras, resources, time, and effort were invested in creating subject matter experts or country experts over the long term. Now, short term goals are prioritized and personnel are moved around like pieces on a chessboard, expected to get up to speed as quickly as possible. This has translated into a loss of continuity and created a challenge with respect to establishing the geostrategic big picture necessary to contextualize the often disparate pieces of intelligence that are collected.

While technology has, in many cases, vastly improved the quality and quantity of intelligence that can be collected, an unintended consequence is that the sheer volume of information collected in 2019 is often overwhelming for analysts. Intelligence personnel, out of necessity, spend most of their time focused on the intelligence itself, while the less sexy, seemingly boring ground-level indicators that are essential to providing critical geopolitical context to any analysis fall through the cracks. That context is key to both gaining a complete picture of the situation and amplifying the value of the intelligence itself. All of the pieces of a quilt can be laid out on a table. If no one is stitching the quilt together, it’s easy to miss the pattern in the pieces.

While it will take time for intelligence agencies to address the issues discussed above, one shortcoming that can be addressed without significant resource expenditure is a change in mindset. Intelligence agencies must dispel with the lingering tendency to view all terrorism through the Islamic State lens. This behavior often leads to narrowly asking the wrong questions and looking at the wrong indicators. Rather than simply asking how many Sri Lankans went to Iraq and Syria to fight for the Islamic State, and how does that increase the risk of radicalization in Sri Lanka when they return home, analysts also need to consider factors such as changes to the dress code for women in Sri Lanka’s Muslim enclaves and the number of citizens who are traveling to the Arab Gulf states to attend school, among many others.

There is, of course, no single solution, either to radicalization or to countering it, but understanding local dynamics is essential. Each movement should be tackled individually. While ties to international movements and actors can and should be taken into consideration, analysts must do the hard work of looking at individual scenarios holistically. In the case of Sri Lanka, policy makers who are truly committed to rebuilding their society will have to acknowledge the unsavory influences that have changed local culture in recent years and recreate what it means to be Sri Lankan. Without restitching the country’s social fabric, future attacks should be anticipated.