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## **The Islamic State's Global-Localization Strategy in Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines**

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### **Abstract**

Despite the United States and its allies recently declaring the utter defeat of the terrorist organization Islamic State's (IS) strongholds in Iraq and Syria, the 2019 Easter suicide bombings in Sri Lanka highlights IS's successful transformation into a globally networked organization. This paper examines IS's global-localization strategy by identifying the common patterns in its terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines. Through global-localization, the so-called IS caliphate in the Middle East is able to effectively connect with Muslim communities in the peripheral Global South and command supremacy over them. I will outline IS's self-transformative strategy by comparing its terror attacks in Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines. Through historical analysis of post-colonial ethnic conflicts among the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim groups in Sri Lanka, I will generate policy recommendations for the establishment of a pluralistic and inclusive intelligence system as an essential means to prevent further terrorist attacks.

**Keywords:** globalization of terrorism, Islamic State, security and intelligence studies

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## **Introduction**

On 21 April 2019, Easter Sunday, a series of suicide bombing attacks took place in Sri Lanka. At least two Catholic churches, one Protestant church and four luxurious hotels were attacked (CNBC 2019; Sirilal and Aneez 2019). The attacks left 259 people dead and at least 500 injured (Colombo Telegraph 2019; Heim 2019; International Travel News 2019). Women and children were discovered to have participated in the bombings (Otto, Shah, Mandhana and Emont 2019). The founder of the Sri Lankan extremist Sunni-Islamic organization National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ)—Zahran Hashim—was identified as the “bombing mastermind” behind this series of terrorist attacks (Al Jazeera 2019; Aneez 2016; BBC News 2019a; BBC News 2019b; BBC News 2019c; BBC News 2019d; Bengali 2019; Farmer, Smith and Evans 2019; Kiley, Wright, McKenzie and Griffiths 2019; MEMRI 2019; Safi 2019; Slater, Harris and Perera 2019; Palmer 2019; Subramanian 2019).

Despite claims by the United States of America (US) that the Sunni extremist armed organization – the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS) – was completely defeated, the 2019 Sri Lanka Easter bombings suggest that IS might have survived the US-led military campaign and morphed into a globally networked organization. Although IS has lost its geographical-territorial stronghold in Iraq and Syria, its struggle for domination and desire for establishing a transnational caliphate is far from over. I posit that its zone of struggle has shifted to the “peripheries” in the Global South. Using Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines as case studies, I will show how IS has successfully transformed into a decentralizing global-localization organization (Burke 2019; Callimachi and Schmitt 2019; Groll 2019; MacKinnon 2019; Qi 2019; Ren 2019).

While there is insufficient evidence to fully support the claim that IS’s foreign recruits

will be national security threats once they leave the organization's Middle East stronghold and return to their home countries, the rise of right-wing nationalism in the West has resulted in the United Kingdom (UK) and US acting preemptively by barring these foreign fighters from returning home. Researchers estimated that IS had 45,000-50,000 foreign fighters from more than 50 countries within its ranks in the Middle East in 2019 (Byman, 2019; Malet, 2019). As Western countries refused to allow these foreign fighters to return home, they moved to the Global South instead, thereby becoming a global security threat (Peel 2019).

To address the IS's growing presence and activities in the Global South, I will compare the Sri Lankan attacks with recent ones in Indonesia and the Philippines. I will outline IS's self-transformative strategy of global-localization. After a brief historical analysis of the post-colonial ethnic conflicts among the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim groups in Sri Lanka, I will make some policy recommendations towards the establishment of a pluralistic and inclusive intelligence system. I believe that such a system would be an essential means of preventing further terrorist attacks.

### **'Jihadist Families' in Java, Indonesia**

International commentators observed that the 2019 Sri Lanka Easter bombings were plotted and conducted by upper middle class families, most notably women and children (Berg Olsen 2019; Heanue and Tlozek 2019). Even though individual female suicide bombers were present in the Middle East, it was an unprecedented move for whole family units to be used as jihadist suicide bomb units in South Asia and Southeast Asia. To better understand this new mode of terrorism, I will use Indonesia as a case study.

Between 2009 and 2016, terrorist attacks by IS-affiliated Indonesian extremist religious

organizations were exclusively committed by men. In December 2016, the Indonesian authorities successfully prevented the first Indonesian female suicide bomber from launching an attack. By May 2018, three Indonesian middle class families had successfully launched a series of terror attacks in two consecutive days. This series of suicide bombings marked not only the first instance of active female suicide bombers in the country; it was also the first terror attack in Indonesia to involve the use of teenagers and children.

On 8 May 2018, about one hundred and fifty imprisoned IS fighters organized a riot in a Jakarta prison, causing the deaths of five policemen (Nathalia 2018). A series of terror attacks conducted by three Indonesian families followed later on 13-14 May 2018 (Hinicks 2018; Jones 2018a; Jones 2018b). On the morning of 13 May, a six-member family in Surabaya bombed three churches, killing twelve churchgoers as a result (*BBC News* 2018; Kapoor 2018; Shellnutt 2018). In the evening that same day, another six-member family prematurely detonated explosives they were making in their home, leaving only three of their children alive (Hodge and Rayda 2018; Kapoor 2018). The next day, a five-member family triggered their suicide bombs at the police headquarters in Surabaya's South Krembangan District, with only the youngest daughter of the jihadist family surviving (Lamb 2018b). Shockingly, it was discovered that these families used their children to carry or detonate explosives in all these attacks (*Human Rights Watch*, 2018).

These three jihadist families knew each other, as they had participated regularly in religious study groups and prayer activities organized by Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), an Indonesian extremist Islamic organization that had pledged its allegiance to IS (Lamb 2018a). Three generalizations can be surmised from this Indonesian case study:

- I. IS disseminates its jihadist agenda through its delegates, who would then pass on

financial and logistical resources to local extremist Islamic organizations outside its territorial base in the Middle East. In using these organizations' local networks, IS is able to localize its theology, ideology and agenda for specific communities across the Global South, thus recruiting more foreign Muslims into its caliphate.

II. Local Islamic organizations affiliated to IS are the organization's middlemen agents. They would covertly gather intelligence, train potential recruits, organize and mobilize supporters, and recruit fresh blood for IS. By ingratiating themselves in local communities, they would be able to participate in the daily activities of communal religious study and prayer groups. Upon infiltrating these study and prayer groups, they would recruit Muslim families to IS's holy war or jihad.

III. Suicide bombing is the most commonly used holy war strategy. Common targets include governmental security forces and churches. By infiltrating local communities, IS is able to influence, guide and command extremist Islamic activities in the Global South even though it has lost its territorial foothold in the Middle East.

The Philippines will serve as another example of IS's global-localization strategy, which I will now discuss.

### **'Foreign Fighters' in Southern Philippines**

As can be seen in Table 1, IS successfully recruited several tens of thousands of foreign fighters in the past (Benmelech and Klor 2016, 16; Picker, 2016). After these recruits arrived at the IS Middle East bases, they received theological and military training, and gained real-life combat experiences.

**Table 1:** Country-origins and estimated numbers of the IS foreign fighters

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Number</b>
<b>1</b>	Tunisia	6,000	<b>11</b>	Indonesia	700
<b>2</b>	Saudi Arabia	2,500	<b>12</b>	Egypt	600
<b>3</b>	Russia	2,400	<b>13</b>	Belgium	470
<b>4</b>	Turkey	2,100	<b>14</b>	Tajikistan	386
<b>5</b>	Jordan	2,000	<b>15</b>	Bosnia	330
<b>6</b>	France	1,700	<b>16</b>	Austria	300
<b>7</b>	Morocco	1,200	<b>17</b>	China	300
<b>8</b>	Lebanon	900	<b>18</b>	Kazakhstan	300
<b>9</b>	Germany	760	<b>19</b>	Sweden	300
<b>10</b>	UK	760	<b>20</b>	Kosovo	232

**Data sources:** Benmelech and Klor 2016, Table 1, p. 16; and Picker 2016

Following international military campaigns to reclaim the lands seized by IS, the organization evolved by exporting its trained and experienced foreign fighters to the Global South so as to re-territorialize IS through localization. By taking over these “peripheries” in the Global South, IS would be able to localize itself and make inroads into the global Muslim communities, thus establishing a transnational jihadist network.

The predominantly Muslim city of Marawi in Southern Philippines has the largest Muslim population in the country. As of 2017, approximately 200,000 Muslims reside in Marawi. The leader of the local terrorist organization Abu Sayyaf, – Isnilon Hapilon – joined forces with another Marawi terrorist organization, the Maute group in May-October 2017. Like

the leaders of the Maute group, Hapilon pledged his allegiance to IS. Their joint armed campaign resulted in the Siege of Marawi. Despite receiving support from the US, the Philippine army spent five months reclaiming the city (Amnesty International 2017). When the battle ended, over 1,200 deaths were recorded (Solomon and Villamor 2018). The Philippine authorities reported that foreign fighters from Indonesia, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Chechnya also took part in the Battle of Marawi (Paddock and Villamor 2017). Additionally, about 40 IS-affiliated foreign fighters came from the Indonesian extremist religious organization Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (Chan 2017).

In July 2018, a suicide car bombing took place at a military checkpoint in Basilan, Southern Philippines. This attack killed eleven people, including the Moroccan suicide bomber. IS claimed responsibility for this attack (Navales and Maitem 2018). As suicide car bombings are rare in Southern Philippines, the Philippine authorities believed the Moroccan jihadist agent had received intelligence and logistical support from the local Abu Sayyaf terrorist group (Mogato 2018).

In January 2019, two bombs exploded in a Roman Catholic cathedral in Jolo, Southern Philippines (*BBC News* 2019g; Kelly 2019). More than twenty people died from the blast (Gutierrez 2019). Not long after the attack, the Philippine authorities claimed that the two suicide bombers responsible were an Indonesian couple (Aben 2019). Indonesia took umbrage at this, accusing the Philippine senior officials of jumping to conclusions without proper investigations (Jones 2019c). Efforts were made to uncover the truth, but the Indonesian government was not able to confirm the identities of the couple as their bodies were blown to pieces (Lestari and Torres 2019; *Straits Times* 2019). IS subsequently claimed responsibility for the attack (Beech and Gutierrez 2019).



Based on these Philippine brushes with suicide bombings, it is apparent that IS is not only able to launch large-scale terror attacks against target cities through local terrorist groups; it is also able to dispatch foreign recruits and jihadist families as fighters against local governmental security forces and churches (Yeo 2019).

### IS Global-Localization Strategy

**Table 2** A comparison of IS global-localization strategy in Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines (2016-2019).

	<b>Co-opted Organization</b>	<b>Key Agency</b>	<b>Recruitment</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Strategy</b>
<b>Sri Lanka</b>	Local Muslim organizations	Middle-class families, including women and children	Local and transnational religious networks, including study and prayer groups	Churches and hotels of foreign visitors	Suicide bombing
<b>Indonesia</b>	Local Muslim organizations	Middle-class families, including women and children	Local and transnational religious networks, including	Churches and police force	Suicide bombing

			study and prayer group		
<b>Philippines</b>	Local Islamic terrorist groups	Local terrorists, armed insurgents and foreign fighters	Local and transnational religious and terrorist networks	Churches, military check-points and local Muslim community	Suicide bombing, car suicide- bombing, siege of Islamic city

Based on the Indonesian and Filipino case studies above (Table 2), we know that IS has successfully made inroads in South and Southeast Asia through its global-localization strategy. This strategy entails the following specifics (Wong 2019a):

- I. By exporting foreign jihadist fighters to countries in the Global South, they are able to infiltrate the local extremist Islamic organizations and recruit them to its cause. In order to achieve full command over these local organizations, IS would provide them with money, intelligence, and military and organizational support.
- II. Once the local extremist Islamic organizations are co-opted, IS would use their local Muslim organization and communal family networks to spread its theology and practices. Susceptible local Muslim individuals and families within these networks would be groomed and trained into jihadist families who would gladly sacrifice their lives for IS causes. Thus, these radicalized local jihadist families would join IS's foreign fighters' community and participate in terror activities within and outside their home countries.

III. Supported by extremist Islamic eschatology and theological practices, these jihadist families would commit acts of violence, such as suicide bombing attacks against government forces and churches, on behalf of IS, within and outside their home countries.

IV. By co-opting local extremist Islamic organizations, IS is able to infiltrate Muslim communities transnationally. The new jihadist recruits would then believe that complete absorption into the IS caliphate system is the only path to salvation and paradise after death.

### **Sri Lanka's New Security Challenges**

In May 2019, anti-Muslim violence broke out in a number of Tamil-dominant towns and cities in the northwestern and western regions of Sri Lanka. Many mosques and shops were burnt, resulting in many grave injuries and a subsequent implementation of curfews. Since the Easter terrorist attacks earlier that year, the Sinhalese-dominated state security apparatus realized that inter-ethnic relationships ought to be properly handled so that there would not be a repeat of the 2009 Tamil armed insurgency. After the government implemented a nationwide 10-day-long state of emergency (*BBC News* 2019f), then Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe called for Sri Lankans to remain calm in order to prevent ethnic violence from escalating (*BBC News* 2019e).

In view of the situation, the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and Responsibility to Protect called for Colombo to have zero tolerance towards racial hate and ethnic prejudice, as Sri Lanka is a pluralistic society composed of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians (Dieng and Smith 2019). Pundits hypothesized that these attacks occurred because Sri Lanka was due for a general election in November 2019, and that the instigators of the waves

of violence wanted to intensify inter-ethnic hatred to push voters into demanding for the return of strongman rule—especially the Rajapaksas’—over the country. This prediction was vindicated when the newly elected Sri Lankan president Gotabaya Rajapaksa appointed his brother and former president Mahinda as the new prime minister (*Al Jazeera* 2019b; Bengali Mushtaq 2019; Miglani and Aneez 2019). The spate of violence and the return of Mahinda Rajapaksa to a position of power indicate that Sri Lanka is facing several new security challenges:

- I. The infighting among the Sinhalese ruling elite prevented them from reacting to the terror attacks in a timely fashion, even though Sri Lankan Muslims had alerted the authorities to these plots in advance (Marlow 2019). As a result, the sharing of much needed intelligence was hindered and the terror attacks were not thwarted.
- II. Following the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War against the Tamil Tigers in 2009 and the end of Mahinda Rajapaksa’s presidency in 2015 after ten years in power, the country’s national intelligence system has lost its robustness (Miglani and Aneez 2019).
- III. Apart from having allegedly visited IS’s stronghold in the Middle East, the terrorists behind the Easter bombings were also connected with Muslim communities in southern India and the disputed Kashmir region claimed by India, Pakistan and China (*NDTV* 2019).
- IV. As a new Cold War is unfolding between the US, China and Russia (Dews 2019; *Sputnik News* 2019; Warner 2019; Westcott 2019), the small states in the Global South have to strengthen their multilateral intelligence relationships if they are to meet their own security needs (Mazarr, Heath and Cevallos 2018, xi). This would prevent them from being susceptible to infiltrative regime change disasters caused by the great powers.

To effectively address these new transnational security challenges, Sri Lanka needs to

connect with foreign intelligence agencies of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. National intelligence practitioners are influenced by realism, and often have a polarized “us versus the enemy” mentality, causing them to neglect the possibility of a pluralistic intelligence community. Intelligence officials are constrained by their bureaucratic state hierarchies, which limit their creativity and flexibility, and prevent them from inclusively sharing intelligence with other nations’ intelligence officials (Wong, 2019b). As new security challenges are emerging much faster than before, the global intelligence community is in genuine need of an alternative practice.

In the following paragraphs, I will examine Sri Lankan scholar S. I. Keethaponcalan’s (2019) recent research findings on the historical development of trilateral Muslim-Sinhala-Tamil ethnic relations. After doing so, I will elaborate on my notion of an inclusive intelligence system and how it can address Sri Lanka’s new security challenges.

### **Historical Development of Inter-Ethnic Relations in Sri Lanka**

Most Sri Lankan Muslims can trace their ancestry to the Tamil-speaking regions of southern India, and thus have Tamil as their mother tongue (Keethaponcalan 2019, 105). As an ethnic group that is traditionally engaged in trade and business, the Muslims did not participate in the historical Tamil-Sinhala struggle for land ownership. As Sunni Muslims, they have gradually come to dominate the Sri Lankan economy. These features therefore make up the unique cultural identity of Sri Lankan Muslims.

During British colonial rule, Tamil leader Ponnambalam Ramanathan obstructed the Muslim community from electing their representatives into the colonial Ceylonese legislature in 1889. He did this to prevent the Muslims from competing against the Tamils for political power.

However, the British colonial government decided to recognize the political legitimacy of the Muslims by appointing A. C. Abdul Rahman as the Muslim representative in the colonial legislature. Since then, there has been an ingrained anti-Tamil sentiment within Sri Lankan Muslim cultural identity. This Muslim-Tamil rivalry contributed to the post-colonial political dominance of the ethnic Sinhala (Wong 2019b).

In 1948, Sri Lanka gained its independence from Britain. In the immediate post-independence years, the conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils intensified. In 1956, the Muslims supported the government's "Sinhala Only Act", which rendered the Tamils second class citizens (Keethaponcalan 2019, 112). In the 1970s, the Muslims supported the government's decision to change the student admission quotas system in universities. They also supported the enforcement of a policy for a standardized university entrance examination system. Under this new university examination system, Sinhalese would be the main medium of instruction. The Sri Lankan Muslims supported these changes because the Tamils had been in control of teaching and research resources in the universities' science, technology, engineering and medical faculties for a very long time. The Muslims supported the government's changes to higher education policies in the hope that Tamils would be restricted from dominating the scientific fields, thus opening the way for more young Muslims to receive university education (Keethaponcalan 2019, 113).

In 1976, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Tamil Tigers) formally launched a protracted armed struggle against the Sri Lankan government. The civil war seriously damaged the relations between the Tamils and the Sinhala-Muslim alliance. In the northern region controlled by the Tamil Tigers, an estimated 60,000-70,000 Muslims were forced to leave their homes (Keethaponcalan 2019, 114 and 119).

During the civil war, the Sri Lankan military absorbed the Tamil-speaking Muslims into its intelligence wing. This enabled them to infiltrate and successfully disintegrate a number of plots and bases of the Tamil Tigers. The Tamil Tigers also intensified their military campaign against the Muslims during this time. For example, on 3 August 1990, armed men entered two mosques and fired indiscriminately, causing more than 150 deaths. It was estimated that at least one thousand Muslims in the eastern provinces were murdered by the Tamil Tigers (Keethaponcalan 2019, 115).

To alleviate the lack of military manpower during the civil war, then President Mahinda Rajapaksa recruited the Muslims into the military campaign through two fronts. Firstly, he established the Muslim Home Guards, a paramilitary organization that was designed to assist in defeating the Tamil Tigers' insurgency. Secondly, he set up the Deep Penetration Unit within the Sri Lankan secret intelligence service, which successfully assassinated several rebel leaders (Keethaponcalan 2019, 120).

Following the end of the civil war and the devolution of power to local governments in 2009-2015, Muslims asked for autonomy and self-governance so that they would not be ruled and oppressed by the Tamils. However, since 2009, there have been new waves of anti-Muslim violence and communal riots across the country. It was estimated that more than 30,000 Sinhala Buddhist monks participated in them (Keethaponcalan 2019, 124). What are the reasons for these overt displays of protests against Muslims?

Chiefly, it has to do with fear. Muslim numbers are rising in Sri Lanka, so much so that it is predicted they will surpass the Tamils to become the second largest population in Sri Lanka by 2020 (Keethaponcalan 2019, 132). Some Sinhala strategists also fear that Muslims will eventually take over Sinhala to become the largest population of Sri Lanka. They further fear that

Sri Lanka will go the way of Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Maldives by shifting away from Buddhism and becoming a Muslim country (Keethaponcalan 2019, 131).

Given the recent developments in Sri Lanka, I believe a new multipolar world order is unfolding and that the Sinhala strategists need to consider the bigger geostrategic picture if they are to cope with it. In a multipolar world, power is not dominated by one country but is distributed among multiple countries (Shapiro 2018). In such world, Islamic countries will wield some power in determining and shaping international economic and political affairs. If Sri Lanka is to make the best of this future multipolar world, Colombo needs to craft inclusive national security and intelligence policies to enable its Muslim citizens to work for the country's national interests. This would build a pluralistic, inclusive and unified post-colonial Sri Lanka that is capable of balancing the intensifying competitions between the great powers and the Islamic world.

### **Inclusive Intelligence System**

The inclusive intelligence system is a post-colonial intelligence practice. Based on realist interdependency in which international security is necessitated by international interpenetration, the inclusive intelligence system aims to establish a global network of multilateral intelligence sharing. This network system entails the following (Wong 2019b):

- I. While Muslim intelligence agents are permitted to meet their foreign intelligence counterparts to exchange information, they must make regular reports on their personal situations to the Sri Lankan National Security Council and its State Intelligence Service.
- II. The coordinating office of the transnational intelligence network will operate under a multilateral security clearance that will be recognized by Sri Lanka and other states in the



Global South. The participating states should be politically neutral and pledge their allegiance to the Non-Aligned Movement.

III. The network coordinator and officers should regularly report their personal situations to the participating states' national intelligence systems and/or national security services. The network coordinator and officers should also practice the key intelligence ethics of openness, transparency and integrity.

IV. The Muslim intelligence operatives should be allowed to flag the confidentiality of an intelligence report. But because the coordinating office is a nexus of multilateral channels of intelligence, the coordinator will determine the classification of the intelligence reports at his/her discretion. When an intelligence report has sensitive information about an “enemy”, the network coordinator should consider the circumstances and hold a meeting with the related intelligence personnel. So doing would clarify the reliability of the intelligence report and allow the coordinator to objectively assess the intent of the informant.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing pages in this chapter argue that IS adopted the new strategy of global-localization after it lost its territorial stronghold in the Middle East. This strategy involves IS decentralizing itself so that it can better connect with like-minded extremist Islamic organizations in the Global South. By providing financial, military, intelligence, logistical and religious support to the local extremist Islamic organizations, IS succeeded in transforming itself into an entity with a global reach and a well-received network of local terrorism.

Through the case studies of Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines, I argued that IS's key

modus operandi in its new strategy is the recruitment of middle class Muslim families—most notably, women, teenagers and children—for its jihadist agenda. To address the new security challenges faced by Sri Lanka, I traced the inter-ethnic relational development between the Muslim, Tamil and Sinhala ethnic groups, and devised specific ways of constructing an inclusive intelligence system through which Muslims could serve the national security interests of Sri Lanka and the international community in the Global South.

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