

Why ISIS launched a terror attack on Sri Lanka

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29 May 2019

One month has passed since the April 21 terrorist bombings on three Christian churches and three luxury hotels in Sri Lanka killed over 250 innocent men, women and children, and injured many more.

The government and defence establishment received prior warning from foreign intelligence sources but took no action to prevent the attacks. No plausible official explanation has been given as to why no preventative measures were taken.

In the aftermath, however, all factions of the political establishment have backed the imposition of a state of emergency and draconian police state measures and are whipping up anti-Muslim communalism and violence. The real target of this new “war on terror” is the rising struggles of the working class against the government’s austerity measures.

The evidence made public to date indicates that the atrocity was carried out by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in conjunction with a local Islamist extremist group, National Thowheeth Jamma’ath (NTJ), but there remain many unanswered questions.

On April 23, ISIS claimed responsibility for attacks via its AMAQ news agency, releasing a photograph of the group of eight suicide bombers including Zahran Hashim, the leader of the NTJ. The caption read: “The executors of the attack that targeted citizens of coalition states and Christians in Sri Lanka two days ago were with the group.”

Six days later, ISIS leader Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi appearing on a video, praising the suicide bombers who “struck homes of Crusaders in their Easter, in vengeance for their brothers in Baghouz.” Baghouz, a village in eastern Syria, was the last ISIS stronghold in Syria. After its fall to US-backed forces, the Trump administration boasted in March that ISIS had been eliminated.

Neither statement mentioned the NTJ by name. However, an Indian intelligence agency sent a specific warning to its Sri Lankan counterparts on April 4 based on information obtained from the interrogation of an ISIS suspect. It stated that the attack involved suicide bombings, was being organized by NTJ operative Zahran and was targeted at churches.

TJ was formed by Zahran in 2016 after breaking away from the Sri Lanka Thowheeth Jamma’ath (SLTJ) which had been founded in 2012. The SLTJ leaders, who declare themselves moderates, allege that Zahran advocated violence and a more fundamentalist Islamist line.

Commentators in the Sri Lankan and international media have declared that the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka were in retaliation for the loss of ISIS territory in Iraq and Syria. But none of them has explained why Sri Lanka was targeted rather than the US or any of its immediate allies in conflict in the Middle East.

Under President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, however, Sri Lanka has been closely integrated with US imperialism, diplomatically and militarily. The strategic significance of the island is underscored by the 2015 regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington that ousted Mahinda Rajapakse as president and installed Sirisena. Rajapakse was regarded as too close to China.

Over the past four years, the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) has greatly strengthened its military ties with Sri Lanka, training its soldiers and holding joint military exercises. INDOPACOM is also assisting in the establishment of a Sri Lankan navy marine corps along the line of the US Marines.

Addressing the Senate Armed Services Committee in Washington in early February, INDOPACOM chief Admiral Philip Davidson declared that Sri Lanka

“remains a significant strategic opportunity in the Indian Ocean and our military-to-military relationship continues to strengthen.”

President Sirisena, who is also defence minister, renewed the Access and Cross Service Agreement (ACSA) with the US in August 2017 for an indefinite period with the approval of the cabinet. First signed in 2007 for 10 years, ACSA allows the US military to use Sri Lankan sea and air ports for supplies and storage.

The USS John C. Stennis, the US aircraft carrier with the 7th Fleet, visited Sri Lanka’s Trincomalee port in January to receive supplies as part of the establishment of a US Naval Logistics Hub at the strategic deep-water port.

US Navy website noted on December 9, that the hub “allows for the use of an airstrip and storage facilities to receive large-scale shipments to move out in various directions in smaller shipments, allowing ships to continue operating at sea by receiving the right material at the right place and time.”

Between January 21 and 29, an aircraft from the USS John C. Stennis was involved in logistics operations from Sri Lanka’s Katunayake International Airport, to the giant aircraft carrier stationed in Trincomalee.

The US immediately seized on the April 21 terrorist attacks to further strengthen its military and strategic ties with Sri Lanka. Dozens of FBI investigators and military experts from INDOPACOM landed in the country to “help investigations” within 48 hours of the bombings.

Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Tilak Marapana visited Washington earlier in May to participate in a high-level “partnership dialogue” with the US. He met with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Under-Secretary David Hale and also US National Security Advisor John Bolton.

During Marapana’s visit, US officials reportedly raised changing the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the two countries. This agreement was signed in 1995 under President Chandrika Kumaratunga and has been in operation ever since. When it was revealed last week that an update was under consideration, the two governments dismissed the report saying it was “normal practice.”

A US embassy spokesman stated: “These updates will streamline processes that are already in place and will facilitate collaboration with the Sri Lankan military

on counter terrorism practices, maritime security and other issues of common concern.”

The changes, however, could facilitate the sending of US troops to the island under the pretext of fighting terrorism.

Just after the bombings, US Secretary of State Pompeo telephoned Prime Minister Wickremesinghe pledging assistance and blaming “Islamic radical terror” for the attack. “This is America’s fight, too,” he declared. In reality, the US is directly responsible for spawning Islamist groups like Al Qaeda during its anti-Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s and has exploited Islamist groups such as ISIS, an Al Qaeda breakaway, in the civil war in Syria.

The US imperialism’s ties with Sri Lanka are particularly aimed against China, as part of its far broader economic war against Beijing and military build-up throughout the region in preparation for war. The US war drive is raising tensions throughout the region and dragging Sri Lanka into a confrontation that could erupt into a catastrophic war between nuclear-armed powers.

The Sri Lankan working class should oppose the strengthening of the US military presence on the island and join with its class brothers and sisters around the world in building a unified anti-war movement of the international working class in the fight for socialism. This is the perspective fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and all its sections including the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka.



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