On the morning of April 21, 2019, eight Sri Lankan suicide bombers, handled and supported by ISIS, carried out a series of simultaneous suicide bombing attacks in three cities and seven locations in Sri Lanka. Most of the attacks were carried out in Colombo, the capital, where there were attacks on a church and three luxury hotels. Two churches were attacked in Negombo, about 30 kilometers (19 miles) north of Colombo; and in Batticaloa, 218 (135 miles) kilometers northeast of Colombo. An additional suicide bombing attack, which was supposed to have been carried out that morning in a hotel in Colombo, failed because of a technical error, but was carried out in the afternoon in a different hotel. In addition, three policemen were killed when they conducted a search of an estate in Colombo which belonged to one of the terrorists, the son of a rich spice merchant.

The locations of the terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka: the four hotels (blue circles) and three churches (red circles) where the suicide bombing attacks took place. The black circle marks the location where an explosive device blew up during a search in a safe house (Google Maps).
The suicide bombing attacks killed at least 253 people¹ and wounded about 500 (as of April 26, 2019). Most of the people killed were Sri Lankan Christians who died during Easter services in their churches. Among those killed were about 40 foreign nationals (most of them killed in the Shangri-La Hotel and the Cinnamon Grand Hotel). Most of the foreigners were from Western countries, the others were Asian. The most deadly attack was at St. Sebastian’s Church in Negombo, to the north of Colombo, where more than 100 people died during the Easter service (the heads of the church say the number may be much higher).

According to the ITIC’s initial information, the attack was professionally planned and carried out. Apparently it was preceded by the collecting of precise information about the various targets and their routine activities (breakfast hours, church service hours, etc.). There were also high-level logistic and technical preparations, and safe houses were prepared. The suicide bombers showed determination and the ability to improvise, evidenced by their overcoming a technical problem and carrying out a suicide bombing attack later at a different location.

According to footage from security cameras and statements from eye witnesses, the suicide bombers carried the bombs in large backpacks and did not wear explosive vests hidden under their clothing, as ISIS reported in its detailed claim of responsibility.² Apparently the warm weather forced the terrorists to wear lighter clothing, because the long coats necessary to hide explosive vests or belts would have aroused suspicions. The security camera footage indicates that the backpacks were heavy and attached to the terrorists’ bodies with both shoulder and stomach straps (which would have made them difficult to remove if a struggle ensued with security personnel or observant civilians).

¹ On April 25, 2019, the Sri Lankan authorities lowered the estimated number of people killed from 359 to 253. They said the difference was the result of the difficulty in identifying the bodies at the scenes of the explosions (Reuters, April 25, 2019).
² ISIS announced that five of the suicide bombers detonated explosive vests and one detonated an explosive belt in the Zion Church in Batticaloa. A group photo of the suicide bombers shows them holding knives and not wearing explosive vests, different from former ISIS videos of claims of responsibility. It may have been done to keep the use of backpacks from being exposed.
The suicide bomber at the entrance to the forecourt of St. Sebastian’s Church in Negombo, with a backpack containing a bomb and wearing a short-sleeved shirt (F. Jeffery@Natsecjeff's Twitter account, April 23, 2019).

The suicide bombers who carried out the attacks were Sri Lankan nationals. They were led by a religious figure named Muhammad Hashem Zahran (Abu Ubaida). His face was seen in pictures and in an ISIS video. He comes from a Muslim family living on Sri Lanka’s eastern coast. He studied at an Islamic college in the city of Katankudy, the majority of whose residents are Muslim, south of the city of Batticaloa (where one of the suicide bombing attacks took place). Reportedly, in 2014 he founded a radical Islamist organization called the National Thowheeth Jamaath (NTJ) (“national unity group”), influenced by Saudi Arabian Wahhabism. In the past members of the organization connected to Muhammad Zahran carried out several minor violent activities (attacks on local Sufi Muslims, the destruction of Buddhist statues). According to initial reports, the NTJ was behind the terrorist attack, but as yet that is unverified.

The information concerning the eight suicide bombers is initial and partial, and comes mainly from the Sri Lankan authorities. According to the information, the bombers were well educated and came from established middle class families (two of them were the sons of a rich spice merchant from Colombo). At least two had studied in Britain and Australia. The operative who studied in Britain was supposed to carry out the attack on the Taj Samudra Hotel. The attack was not carried out for technical reasons, and was later carried out at a different hotel. Behind the group of suicide bombers was a network, parts of which were exposed after the attack. In addition, the network in Sri Lanka had supporters in the local

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3 The Sri Lankan minister of defense said the suicide bombing attacks were not carried out by the NTJ but by a splinter group headed by Muhammad Zahran. The minister said that the matter was being investigated (YouTube channel of ADA derana, April 24, 2019).
Muslim community (scores of suspects were arrested by the local security forces after the attack).

The operational network in Sri Lanka, which included terrorists who were supposed to carry out additional suicide bombing attacks, had safe houses, weapons and explosives. Some of the network was exposed in a raid carried out by the Sri Lankan security forces on two houses on the country’s eastern coast. During a raid on one of the houses (apparently where Muhammad Zahran lived) three operatives who had explosive vests were killed (according to the Sri Lankan army). In one of the houses materials for making explosive devices and ISIS notices were found. The evidence seems to indicate that the operatives of the terrorist network planned to carry out other suicide bombing attacks.

The role of ISIS

On April 23, 2019, two days after the terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka, ISIS used its media outlets to issue three claims of responsibility: a short announcement, an announcement with additional information, and a more detailed announcement issued by the network in Sri Lanka. One announcement had a picture of the eight terrorists who carried out the attacks, all of them masked, except for their commander, Abu Ubaida (who was later identified by the Sri Lankan authorities and media as a local cleric named Muhammad Hashem Zahran, who was killed in the Shangri-La Hotel). The announcement was accompanied by a short video of the suicide bombers, headed by Abu Ubaida, swearing loyalty to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (as part of the oaths of loyalty recently carried out by ISIS to improve al-Baghdadi’s image, which was tarnished during the past year). Such accompaniment by the media is not routine. ISIS apparently made preliminary media preparations before the Sri Lanka terrorist attack was carried out.

So far it is unclear how Muhammad Zahran and his followers made contact with ISIS. ISIS does not have a province in Sri Lanka and never paid particular attention to the country. The connections may have been made by Sri Lankans who went abroad to study and/or by Muhammad Zahran himself while abroad. It is also possible (but so far unproven) that the group that carried out the attacks, all or part of it, was composed of Sri Lankans who fought in the ranks of ISIS and returned to Sri Lanka in the wake of the defeats suffered by the organization (as did other foreign fighters who returned to their countries of origin). In any
event, the high level of professionalism of the attacks indicates the involvement of ISIS in their planning and preparation.

- What were the objectives of the terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka? In ISIS’s perspective, the deadly attacks were intended to raise the morale of its operatives and supporters around the globe, avenge the blow it suffered in Syria and deter the United States and the coalition countries from continuing their struggle against it. The terminology appearing in the claims of responsibility refers to the foreign nationals killed in the hotels as “foreign Crusaders,” citizens of the “international coalition.” The attacks on the churches are also characteristic of ISIS’s strategy (seen in the attack on the Copts in Egypt and the recent attack on the church in the South Philippines). On the other hand, the claims of responsibility make no reference to the attack on the mosques in New Zealand, and "revenge" for the attacks was not one of the objectives.

- In ITIC assessment, the nature of the targets indicates they did not serve the local interests of the Sri Lankan Muslim minority (9.7% of the population, spread around the country). The Sri Lankan Muslim community is in a position of weakness vis-à-vis the Sinhalese Buddhists (70.1% of the population). In recent years (2014, 2018) the Muslim community has been harassed by nationalist Buddhists. Thus the attacks are liable to increase the tensions between the Buddhists and the Muslims, and lead to additional harassment of the Muslim community.

- On the other hand, the local Muslims have no significant difficulties with the Christian minority (7.6% of the population). The attacks on the churches do not serve any interest of the Muslim community, rather, they are liable to give the Sinhalese Buddhists an excuse to increase their harassment of the Muslims and other religious and ethnic minorities. In addition, the attacks on the large hotels, where Westerners (“coalition Crusaders”) stay, send a message from ISIS to the coalition countries, but do not serve any interest of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka.

- Why did ISIS choose Sri Lanka as an arena for its attack? Until the attack, ISIS had no province in Sri Lanka, and did not pay particular attention to the country. The existence of an ISIS province, or a network of ISIS operatives in Sri Lanka, was unknown (the number of Sri Lankan fighters who went to Syria is relatively low, estimated at only a few dozen). Demographically and geographically, Sri Lanka has a small Muslim minority spread around the country, making it difficult for ISIS to organize there. Apparently Sri Lanka was chosen as
a site for attacks because it was an operational opportunity. Such an opportunity existed because of the weakness of the Buddhist security forces, who focus their activities on the Tamils, and the availability of the operational Sri Lankan group.\(^4\)

According to the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), a New Zealand think tank, approximately 32 Sri Lankan Muslims fought in the ranks of ISIS in Syria (\textit{The Atlantic}, April 24, 2019). By 2017, many of them had returned to Sri Lanka. After a Sri Lankan foreign fighter was killed in an aerial attack on July 21, 2015, Sri Lankan ISIS supporters eulogized him on the social networks and called him a shaheed of Islam (Weekly Blitz, a news site in Bangladesh that opposes radical Islam, April 25, 2019).

\section*{Conclusion}

The ISIS attack in Sri Lanka, using local operatives, was the most complex and deadly attack carried out by ISIS provinces.\(^5\) It was the continuation of a wave of attacks recently carried out by ISIS provinces,\(^6\) and attacks carried out by ISIS networks where the organization has no provinces (in Tunisia, the Congo, Saudi Arabia, and now in Sri Lanka). ISIS’s intensive activity beyond the borders of Iraq and Syria shows that ISIS operatives around the globe still have significant operational capabilities, which enable the organization to cope with the West and its allies, and to initiate large terrorist and guerrilla attacks at a time when it has lost its territorial assets in Syria and Iraq and is under pressure there.

\(^4\) Reuters (April 25, 2019) and other media outlets reported that the attacks in Sri Lanka exposed an intelligence failure, because India had warned the Sri Lankan authorities that ISIS planned to carry out an attack. It was also reported that ten days before the attack, the chief of the Sri Lankan police warned of an intention to attack churches. After the attack internal rivalries in the Sri Lankan government were accused of preventing security cooperation that could have prevented the attacks. On April 25, 2019, Hemasiri Fernando, the Sri Lankan minister of defense, resigned because of the intelligence failure.

\(^5\) The attacks in Sri Lanka killed more people than ISIS’s complex attack in Paris (132 dead, November 13, 2015) and the downing of the Russian plane over the Sinai Peninsula (224 dead, November 8, 2015).

\(^6\) For further information, see the April 14, 2019 bulletin, "Wave of orchestrated ISIS terrorist retaliation attacks around the globe: overview and assessment."
Thus the terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka sent a strong message to the American-led coalition countries and the international community, indicating that despite the blow suffered by ISIS in Syria, the organization still has the potential to carry out deadly attacks. Apparently ISIS and its various provinces abroad are currently making an effort to realize that potential in "compensation" for the organization's difficulties in Iraq and Syria. The "success" of the attack in Sri Lanka is liable to encourage ISIS and its supporters around the globe to initiate other showcase attacks, whose propaganda value is greater than that of its "routine" attacks in remote locations, which gain only slight international interest. In addition, the attack in Sri Lanka is liable to raise the morale of ISIS operatives, encourage the enlistment of new operatives and encourage ISIS to activate foreign fighters who returned to their countries of origin to become involved in terrorist activities (directed or inspired by ISIS).

Contents

- This report contains three appendices:
  - Appendix A: The terrorist attack in Sri Lanka (overview updated to April 28, 2019).
  - Appendix B: ISIS media coverage of the terrorist attack in Sri Lanka.
  - Appendix C: Initial information about the suicide bombers and their leader.
Appendix A

Terrorist attack in Sri Lanka (Updated to April 28, 2019)

Overview

On the morning of April 21, 2019, seven suicide bombers handled and supported by ISIS blew themselves up in three luxury hotels and three churches in three cities in Sri Lanka. The attack in one hotel was not carried out because of technical problems and was postponed to the afternoon at a different hotel. The focus of the suicide bombers was Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital, where four hotels and a church (a popular tourist attraction) were attacked. The suicide bombers detonated their bombs between 08:45 and 09:05 in the morning, during breakfast in the hotel restaurants and during Easter services in the churches.

In addition to the four attacks in Colombo, suicide bombing attacks were carried out in two other cities: one attack was in Negombo, about 30 kilometers (19 miles) north of Colombo. It was carried out at 08:45 during the Easter service, and was particularly deadly, killing more than 100 people (according to the local heads of the church, the number will be significantly higher). Another attack was carried out in Batticaloa, about 218 (135 miles) northeast of Colombo, at 09:05. The following is the partial and initial information available about the attacks, as of April 28, 2019:

Colombo, Sri Lanka’s capital

The Shangri-La Hotel

The Shangri-La Hotel (shangri-la.com)
The Shangri-La Hotel is a new luxury hotel and was attacked by two suicide bombers: one, **Muhammad Zahran**, the commander of the group that carried out the terrorist attack in Sri Lanka; and the other, **Ilham Ibrahim**, son a rich Colombo spice merchant. The attack took place at 08:45. The two suicide bombers took the elevator to the third floor restaurant during breakfast. The security cameras documented two explosions, one in the restaurant and the other in the corridor. The suicide bombing attacks in the Shangri-La Hotel and Cinnamon Grand Hotel claimed the lives of 41 foreign nationals, including eight British citizens (The Sydney Morning Herald, April 25, 2019).

Right: Two suicide bombers with backpacks in the hotel elevator. Left: One of the suicide bombers walks towards the hotel restaurant (YouTube channel of ADA derana, the leading news portal in Sri Lanka, April 25, 2019).

It is noteworthy that two suicide bombers participated in the attack in the Shangri-La Hotel, one of them the group’s commander, and apparently also the network's commander. At the other locations, only one suicide bomber blew himself up. That may indicate ISIS considered it important because they assumed there would be many foreigners staying at the hotel and the attack would gain a lot of media coverage.

**The Cinnamon Grand Hotel**

The Cinnamon Grand Hotel (Kayak, a hotel reservation website)
One suicide bomber blew himself in the ground-floor restaurant of the Cinnamon Grand Hotel. He was identified as **Inshaf Ahmed Ibrahim**, brother of the suicide bomber who blew himself up in the Shangri-La Hotel. According to the footage from the security cameras, he entered the restaurant at 09:12 and blew himself up (ADA derana, April 25, 2019).

![Image](image1.jpg)

The suicide bomber, wearing his backpack, enters the hotel restaurant (YouTube channel of ADA derana, April 25, 2019).

**The Kingsbury Hotel**

A suicide bomber blew himself up in the hotel restaurant, located in the lobby, at 08:47 (according to the security camera footage). The number of foreign nationals killed is not known, but two of them were Spanish and one was Portuguese.

Apparantly the suicide bomber spent the night in the hotel. He was photographed by the security cameras entering the hotel the at 19:30 the previous evening, wearing a peaked cap and carrying a large backpack. He checked in and was photographed entering his room on
the eighth floor. The following morning he was photographed leaving his room at 08:43, and four minutes later there was an explosion (Hindustani Times, April 27, 2019).

Right: April 20, 2019, 19:39 hours. The suicide bomber, with a large backpack and carrying a computer bag walks through the main lobby of the hotel after checking in. Left: April 21, 08:44 hours. The suicide bomber walked towards the hotel restaurant (Hindustani Times, an Indian news site and newspaper, April 27, 2019).

Left: The suicide bomber enters the restaurant on April 21, 2019 (YouTube channel of ADA derana, April 26, 2019). Right: The explosion in the hotel restaurant (Hindustan Times, April 27, 2019).

St. Anthony's Shrine

St. Anthony's Shrine is also a popular tourist attraction. One suicide bomber blew himself up inside, causing serious damage. The ITIC has no information about the number of people killed.
The New Tropical Inn

The terrorist attack that took place on the morning of April 21, 2019, was supposed to include another hotel in Colombo, but it was not carried out. It was carried out in the afternoon at a different location, the New Tropical Inn. According to a report in *The Times of London* (April 25, 2019), based on "an intelligence source" in Sri Lanka, one of the targets was the five-star *Taj Samudra*, situated between the Shangri-La and the Cinnamon Grand hotels. The terrorist arrived at the hotel but a technical problem prevented his explosive device from detonating, and he was forced to return to the safe house in the southern part of Colombo. **At the safe house the problem was fixed and in the afternoon the terrorist went to the New Tropical Inn, a hotel smaller than the original target, to carry out the attack.**

At around 14:00 the suicide bomber blew himself up in the New Tropical Inn, a small hotel near the zoo in the southern part of Colombo, killing two people. The suicide bomber was identified as *Abd al-Latif Jamil Muhammad*, who studied at Kingston University in London in 2016 and 2017 (Mail Online, April 26, 2019).
Three policemen killed during a search at the estate of one of the terrorists, situated in a Colombo suburb

On April 21, 2019, the Sri Lankan police raided the estate of Ilham Ibrahim, one of the two suicide bombers who blew themselves up in the Shangri-La Hotel. During the search carried out of the estate an explosive device detonated, killing three policemen. According to one of the ISIS claims of responsibility, the device was detonated by a terrorist aka Abu Abdallah. According to the Australian media and reports from Sri Lanka, the device was detonated by Ilham Ibrahim's pregnant wife. Reportedly, she and her three children were also killed in the blast (The Sydney Morning Herald, April 25, 2019).

Suicide bombing attack in a church in the city of Negombo

A suicide bombing attack was carried out in St. Sebastian's Church in the city of Negombo, about 30 kilometers (19 miles) north of Colombo. The church's security cameras photographed one suicide bomber. He entered the church towards the end of the mass, walked to the center of the crowded church and detonated the large explosive device in his backpack (F. Jeffery@Natsecjeff's Twitter account). The attack killed more than 100 people and wounded scores. The heads of the church estimate that the number of dead may reach 200 (Reuters, April 25, 2019).
Right: St. Sebastian's Church. Left: The scene of the explosion in St. Sebastian's
(picture website Flicker Hive Mind).

Right: The suicide bomber before he enters the forecourt of the church. Left: The suicide bomber enters the church (F. Jeffery@Natsecejff’s Twitter account, April 23, 2019).

The damage at the St. Sebastian Church shown in ISIS’s weekly al-Nabā’ (Issue 179, April 25, 2019, according to Akhbar al-Muslimin, April 25, 2019).

Suicide bombing attack at a church in the city of Batticaloa

A suicide bombing attack was carried out in the Zion Church in the city of Batticaloa, about 218 kilometers (135 miles) northeast of Colombo. The suicide bomber arrived at the church with a large backpack. One of the worshippers found him suspicious (because he was not
wearing clothing appropriate for the Easter holiday) and prevented him from entering the church. The suicide bomber claimed he had come to photograph the service and had a video camera in his backpack. An argument broke out, and the suicide bomber **blew himself up outside the church**. The blast killed at least 28 people, including 12 children, and scores were injured (The Guardian, Britain, April 24, 2019).

![Right: The Zion Church (website of the Zion Church, Batticaloa, May 7, 2009).](image1)

![Left: The scene of the attack at the Zion Church (garikaalan@garikaalan’s Twitter account, April 21, 2019).](image2)

**Exposure of explosives houses in eastern Sri Lanka**

- According to the Sri Lankan army, on April 26, 2019, security forces raided a house in the town of Kalmunai, on Sri Lanka’s eastern coast (about 40 kilometers south of Batticaloa, where one of the attacks was carried out). Kalmunai is located in the region where group commander Muhammad Zahran was born and operated. During the exchange of fire at least 15 people were killed, among them **three terrorists** who were wearing explosive vests, and six children. During the raid Muhammad Zahran’s wife and daughter were injured (Reuters, April 27, 2019).

- The local media reported that **12 bodies were found in the house**: three men, three women and six children. Three bodies were found outside the house, and a rifle was found near one of them (YouTube channel of ADA derana, April 27, 2019). In ITIC assessment, they were members of Muhammad Zahran’s family, organization operatives and civilians who died during the raid.
The Sri Lankan security forces raided another house in the same area which was also used by the operational network. According to the Sri Lankan army, material for making explosive devices were found at the site, including hundreds of detonators, dozens of gelignite rods, thousands of ball bearings, ISIS notices and uniforms (Reuters, April 27, 2019).

ISIS issued its own version of the event, in ITIC assessment unreliable. According to the ISIS version, three operatives tricked the Sri Lankan police into an ambush inside a house. They barricaded themselves in and exchanged fire with the police for several hours. When they ran out of ammunition they detonated explosive belts to blow themselves up. As a result, 17 policemen (“infidels”) were killed (two ISIS announcements, one by the Sri Lankan network and the other by ISIS's A’maq news agency, Telegram, April 27, 2019).
Sri Lankan soldiers standing near the explosive materials found in one of the houses (YouTube channel of ADA derana, April 27, 2019).

Right: Detonators found in one of the houses. Left: Sticks of gelignite found in one of the houses (YouTube channel of ADA derana, April 27, 2019).

Right: Three backpacks found in one of the houses. They were meant to be used in suicide bombing attacks (YouTube channel of ADA derana, April 27, 2019). Left: ISIS claim of responsibility for the killing and wounding of 17 Sri Lankan policemen. The picture shows two of the three operatives ISIS claimed blew themselves up with explosive belts (ISIS’s A’maq New Agency, uploaded to Telegram, April 27, 2019).
ISIS's media accompanies the terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka

On April 23, 2019, two days after the suicide bombing attacks, ISIS’s media outlets issued three claims of responsibility. The first was short, issued by its A’maq news agency. The second had more details, and was also issued by A’maq. It included a group picture of the eight suicide bombers. The third was the most detailed, and issued by the Sri Lankan [network]. On April 23, 2019, a 59-second video was issued showing the suicide bombers swearing loyalty to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

In ITIC assessment, the slight delay of two days in issuing claims of responsibility was the result of ISIS’s desire to understand the still-unclear situation in Sri Lanka after the attacks. The timing of the claims of responsibility allowed ISIS to integrate information about the results of the attacks already issued by the Sri Lankan and international media, and thus to increase the credibility of its claims.

The ISIS media accompaniment of the suicide bombing attacks in Sri Lanka was complex and unusual. In ITIC assessment, it expressed preliminary media preparations that accompanied the attacks to achieve the greatest possible media coverage.

The short announcement (April 23, 2019)

According to the first announcement, "a security source" told A’maq that the Islamic State operatives were those who carried out the attack on the citizens of the "international coalition" (i.e., the foreign nationals who were killed and wounded) and on the "Christians" (A’maq announcement issued through Telegram, April 23, 2019).

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8 It was issued by Sri Lanka without specific identification of a local ISIS province or network, similar to the claim of responsibility recently issued by ISIS in Tunisia.
ISIS’s short initial claim of responsibility
(A’maq announcement uploaded to Telegram, April 23, 2019).

The more detailed announcement (April 23, 2019)

The second announcement was issued under the headline "Suicide bombing attacks of Islamic State fighters shocks Sri Lanka." It gives an informative report about the attacks in Sri Lanka carried out against "the churches of the Christians and the hotels where foreigners sleep." The number of people reported killed in the announcement was compatible with the numbers reported by the international and Sri Lankan media. The announcement was accompanied by a picture of the eight terrorists, seven of them with their faces covered, who carried out the suicide bombing attacks, standing in front of an ISIS flag. The terrorist in the middle whose face is uncovered, known as Abu Ubaida, was identified by the Sri Lankan authorities as Muhammad Hashem Zahran, the group leader (Akhbar al-Muslimin, April 23, 2019).

The picture accompanying the more detailed claim of responsibility. The picture shows eight ISIS operatives (Abu Ubaida in the center, later identified as Muhammad Zahran). One is standing half-hidden in the back row, with only his head visible, on the right (A’maq announcement as it appeared on Akhbar al-Muslimin, April 23, 2019).
Most complete ISIS announcement (April 23, 2019)

- The third announcement was issued by the Sri Lankan [network] under the headline, "Killing and wounding of 1,000 Crusaders." In addition to the information given in the previous announcements, the nicknames of the suicide bombers were given along with the individual attacks each one carried out (the ISIS-affiliated website Amjad News, April 23, 2019).

The full ISIS claim of responsibility
(the ISIS-affiliated website Amjad News, April 23, 2019).

Video with an oath of loyalty to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

As part of its media accompaniment of the terrorist attack, ISIS issued a 59-second video documenting the suicide bombing terrorists' oath of loyalty to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi while standing in front of the ISIS flag (A'maq, April 23, 2019). The objective of the oath of loyalty to reinforce the status and image of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi by identifying him with the "successful" terrorist attack in Sri Lanka. Similar oaths of loyalty were recent carried out in the Sinai Province and the Iraq Provinces. For that reason, it would seem that the oath of loyalty of the Sri Lankan operatives was taken recently, possibly a short time before the suicide bombing attacks.

- The operative who conducted the oath and the only one whose face was not hidden was referred to in the video and in the claims of responsibility as Abu Ubaida. He was identified by the Sri Lankan authorities as Muhammed Hashem Zahran, a radical Muslim cleric from Sri Lanka's eastern coast, who apparently headed a local jihadi network (see below).
Scenes from the video showing Abu Ubaida (center) conducting the ceremony of swearing loyalty to ISIS (Akhbar al-Muslimin, April 23, 2019).
Appendix C

Initial information about the suicide bombers and their leader

Overview

The information the ITIC possesses about the suicide bombers and their leader, is at the stage initial and partial. The initial reports indicate the attack was carried out by eight suicide bombers from Sri Lanka. They were apparently headed by a radical Muslim cleric named Muhammad Zahran (Abu Ubaida). It is possible that the operatives in the group joined ISIS in Syria, returned to Sri Lanka and were handled by ISIS to carry out the suicide bombing attacks (that possibility needs to be verified). The group was part of a larger operational network of operatives and supporters in Sri Lanka. Dozens of people suspected of ties to the network were arrested by the local security forces. At this stage the ITIC has no information about operatives or supporters. According to some reports, a radical network called the National Thowheeth Jamaath (NTJ) (“national unity group”) was behind the attacks, but that still has not been verified.

Initial information about Muhammad Hashem Zahran

- Muhammad Hashem Zahran, who headed the group of suicide bombers and was apparently also head of the entire operational network, was a Muslim in his 30s from a poor family in Katankudy, a city with a Muslim majority on Sri Lanka’s east coast.

The group leader, aka Abu Ubaida from "Ceylon" [i.e., Sri Lanka] standing in front of the ISIS flag (Telegram, April 22, 2019).

- When he was 12 years old, Muhammad Zahran began studying at the Islamic college in Katankudy. He embraced radical Islam and used to complain to his teachers that they were too liberal in their interpretation of the Qur’an. In 2016 he joined the local mosque and became a member of its board of directors. He was expelled from the mosque because of his
independent positions and refusal to cooperate with the leaders of the local Muslim community (Reuters, April 27, 2019).

► After his expulsion he organized a group of supporters who were attracted to his preaching and Qur’an lessons. He held rallies where he incited against the Katankudy Sufi Muslim community, calling its members “infidels.” His incitement apparently led to violent activities against the local Sufis\(^9\) (a hand grenade was thrown into a Sufi mosque in 2014, and Sufi dwellings were set on fire in 2016). In 2012 Muhammad Zahran established his own mosque, and at that time, according to his sister, he became radicalized, influenced by ISIS material he saw in the Internet (Reuters, April 27, 2019).

► In 2014 Muhammad Zahran established a radical Islam organization in Katankudy called the National Thowheeth Jamaath (NTJ) (“national unity group”). Reports in the Sri Lankan media claimed the NTJ was behind the current terrorist attack in Sri Lanka. However, senior figures in the Sri Lanka administration rejected the claim, saying the matter was still under investigation. In 2018 supporters of Zahran (apparently NTJ members) were behind the destruction of Buddhist statues in the Katankudy region following Buddhist harassment of Muslims in the same year (see footnote below). At this stage it is unknown how and under what circumstances the connection was formed between Muhammad Zahran and ISIS, which enabled the construction of the operational network and the carrying out of the terrorist attack in Sri Lanka.

**Initial information about the suicide bombers**

► The information about the eight suicide bombers that carried out the terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka is, at this stage, based on information given by the Sri Lankan authorities and Western media. According to the Sri Lankan minister of defense, most of them were well educated and came from established middle class families (with the exception of Muhammad Zahran, their commander. At least two of the **operatives studied abroad, one in Britain and another in Australia**. According to “police sources,” among the suicide bombers who carried out the attacks in the hotels in Colombo were two brothers, sons of a rich spice merchant. According to the sources, the two were key members of the group. At this stage the real names of the suicide bombers have not yet been made public.

\(^9\) Sufism is a mystic Islamic trend that emerged in the Muslim world in the 8th century.
Sri Lankan operatives who joined ISIS in Syria

According to the information the ITIC possesses, several dozen Sri Lankans went to Syria to join ISIS and fight in its ranks. Several of them returned to Sri Lanka before or in 2017, leading to an increase in jihadist activity in the country.\textsuperscript{10} There is a possibility (which has to be verified) that operatives returning from Syria were part of the group that carried out the current terrorist attack, or at least supported it.

\begin{itemize}
\item One of the operatives who joined ISIS was exposed when he was killed on July 12, 2015, in an aerial coalition attack on al-Raqqa, ISIS’s Syrian "capital." He was described as the first Sri Lankan killed in Syria. According to a Facebook post (April 23, 2015) his real name was Sharfaz Nilam Muhsin (according to a different version, Sharfaz Shuraih Muhsin).
\item According to ISIS’s magazine \textit{Dabiq}, Muhsin studied Sharia law at the International Islamic University of Pakistan. He taught Urdu at Colombo University and later was the principal of the international school in the Galewela region (in the central Kandy district) o. In December 2014 he and his family, including his parents and pregnant wife and six children received visas for Turkey. According to \textit{Dabiq}, he claimed he was the head of a group of 16 Sri Lankan citizens, including the members of his family, whose objective was to emigrate to the Islamic State.
\end{itemize}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{sharifzuja.png}
\caption{Sharfaz Shuraih Muhsin, aka Abu Shuraih, who was the first Sri Lankan operative killed while fighting in the ranks of ISIS in Syria (Colombo Telegraph, July 25, 2019).}
\end{figure}

\begin{itemize}
\item The operational group that carried out the terrorist attack had a network of operatives and supporters whom the Sri Lankan intelligence services are currently trying to expose. In the days after the attack 76 people were arrested, including a number of foreigners. In addition,
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{10} Dr. Ely Karmon, "A First Take on the Terrorist Attacks in Sri Lanka," the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), April 29, 2019, https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2379/A_first_take_on_the_terrorist_attacks_in_Sri_Lanka#gsc.tab=0
the Sri Lankan police revealed the names and pictures of four men and three women wanted for the involvement in the terrorist attack (Reuters, April 25, 2019). Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirsena said the police were searching for 140 people suspected of ties to ISIS (The Guardian, April 26, 2019).

**ISIS fingerprints on the choice of terrorist attack targets**

- The Sri Lankan population numbers about 22,500,000, 70.1% of whom are Sinhalese Buddhists. Hindus make up about 12.6% of the population, **Muslims 9.7%**, and Christians, most of them Catholics, 7.6% (as of the 2012 census, according to Wikipedia). Politically, Sri Lanka is dominated by the Sinhalese Buddhist majority, which has a tradition of oppressing other ethnic-religious groups, especially the Tamil Hindu minority.

- **The Muslim minority of almost two million inhabitants is spread throughout the island and clearly in a position of weakness vis-à-vis the Sinhalese Buddhist majority.** After suppressing the separatism of the Tamil minority, at the end of a prolonged, bloody civil war that ended in 2009, ethnic tensions did not disappear. In Sri Lanka in recent years there have been acts of violence carried out by Sinhalese Buddhists, also against the Muslim minority, which included a rounds in 2014 and 2018. On the other had, the relations between the Muslim minority and the Christian minority are calm with no exceptional acts of violence.

- The Muslims clear numerical inferiority and their scattering throughout the country forced them to adopt behavior that had neither a radical religious ideology nor jihadist fanaticism. They showed moderate solidarity with Muslims in other countries. In September 2014 the Muslim All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulama (ACJU) issued a condemnation of ISIS. For that reason, the jihadist network that carried out the current terrorist attack was an exception for the Muslim community in Sri Lanka.

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11 In 2014 Muslims in Sri Lanka were faced with a wave of anti-Muslim demonstrations accompanied by violence. Behind the demonstrations were extremist Buddhist organizations and activists, who demanded an end to the Islamic system of halal. In March 2018, a Sinhalese mob attacks dozens of homes and businesses, and at least one mosque, in the central province of Kandy. Before that there were two attacks on Muslims in the eastern part of the country. Buddhist sources claimed the Muslims were trying to convert Buddhists and attacking their archeological sites.

Thus it is possible to assume that ISIS chose the locations for the attacks, since the organization's strategy includes killing Christians ("Crusaders") and attacking churches (for example the attacks on the Coptic churches in Egypt or the attack on the church in the South Philippines). On the other hand, the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka has no particular difficulties with the Christian minority, and the tensions and violence are focused on its relations with the Sinhalese Buddhist majority. In addition, the choice of the large hotels, where foreigners stay (the "coalition Crusaders") is a function of ISIS's ideology and strategy, and not of the interest the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka.