

## The Drivers of Islamist Extremism in Sri Lanka

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**Abstract** – The vicious cycle of violent extremism based on religious and ethnic lines which continuous to plague the world as one of the greatest threats to global security has gained renewed momentum in recent times. The current trend of Islamist extremism rooted on Wahhabi or Salafi ideology has gradually spread its tentacles across the globe, creating a new breed of radical combatants that are significantly redefining the international security landscape. The 4/21 multiple suicide bombings perpetrated by ‘National Thowheeth Jamaath’ (NTJ) on Easter Sunday, 2019 was the first major terrorist attack conducted in Sri Lanka by a Jihadist group that was inspired by the global Salafi Jihadist ideology advocated by ISIS. The Easter Sunday attacks entail multiple national security implications including the fact that such an attack has the potential to inspire others to conduct similar acts of terror and increase support for the Jihadist cause. Salafi Jihadist groups have maintained resilience and has grown in large numbers despite global counterterrorism efforts. This is primarily due to the fact that security strategists and policy makers have failed to address the drivers of Islamist extremism, misunderstood the enemy and misinterpreted their understanding of the global Jihadist ideology. Therefore, in order to effectively prevent and counter Islamist Extremism, it is imperative to identify and understand the drivers of Salafi Jihadist groups which vary across cultures and regions. Even though there are many forms of extremism which is prevalent in the local context, this paper will provide an in-depth analysis on the murky world of Islamist extremism and its evolution in Sri Lanka. This paper which focuses on identifying the drivers of Islamist Extremism in Sri Lanka includes both academic and policy implications.

**Keywords:** *Violent Extremism, Counterterrorism, ISIS, NTJ, LTTE, Salafi Jihad, Radicalisation, PCVE*

### Introduction

Violent extremist groups that enforce radical ethno-religious and ethno-nationalist ideologies are changing the face of warfare across the world. Even though religious ideology has been an empowering force, the individual, contextual and structural drivers of radicalization leading to violent extremism play a significant role in strengthening homegrown and transnational religious extremist groups.

Sri Lanka has experienced a gradual rise in Sinhala Buddhist ultra nationalist extremism and Islamist extremism following the end of three decades of protracted conflict in 2009 against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) separatist terror group. The 4/21 Easter Sunday attacks which was committed by a homegrown Jihadist network which was inspired by the global Salafi Jihadist movement advocated by ISIS is a testament to the national security implications which stem from not comprehensively addressing violent extremist ideology and the drivers of radicalization.

Much controversy and misconceptions revolve around the subject of Islamist extremism in Sri Lanka and the factors that fuel this social phenomenon. Jihadist ideology in Sri Lanka has evolved over time with the drivers of joining such groups changing periodically. Several contextual and structural factors arising from local, geopolitical, economic, historic and cultural fault lines have created a conducive environment for individuals to be susceptible to the process of radicalization, making way for Islamist extremism to breed in the country. Formulating policy without a clear understanding of the root causes and the drivers of Islamist extremism in Sri Lanka can potentially create a precedent which would lead to communities being polarized, stigmatized and individuals being pushed towards radicalization, which in turn will

lead to a vicious cycle of violent extremism and internal conflict.

## Methodology

This research has taken a qualitative approach which draws on insights from first-hand accounts and existing literature in order to provide an empirical analysis on the drivers of Islamist extremism in Sri Lanka. This paper is not intended to offer generalized conclusions, but instead outlines a framework for future analysis and to help inform policy deliberations. This paper is published at a time when the world is facing all forms of ethnic and religious violent extremism and aims to identify the past and contemporary drivers of Islamist Extremism in Sri Lanka.

## Analysis

### A. Overemphasis on the ideological driver

The religious ideological driver of violent extremism has often been hyped and politicized leading to the psychological, contextual and structural drivers being eluded by policy makers and security strategists. Apart from Islamist extremism which gained global prominence following the 9/11 terror attacks, many countries are facing their own security challenges from violent extremist groups stemming from almost all major religions across the world.

A factor which remains certain about groups such as ISIS, Al-Qaida, Taliban, Boko Haram or even the National Thowheeth Jama'ath is that these groups commonly adhere to the ideology of Wahhabism which is the conceptual foundation of Salafi Jihad groups. Wahhabism is a puritanically radical and distorted form of Islam which originated in Najd province of modern-day Saudi Arabia during the early 18th century (Commins, 2006). A majority of Islamic scholars have denounced Wahhabism due to its radical and intolerant practices. Islam which includes several denominations and sects around the world is adhered in many different forms. There are many militant groups that follow the Islamic faith that are engaged in primarily local conflicts which is more aligned to a political ideology which is in contrast to the radical ideology of Salafi Jihadists.

Salafi Jihadist groups which remains decentralised to some extent can be categorised as; Islamic State and its provinces, Al- Qaeda and its affiliates, Other Groups (independent Salafi

Jihadist organizations such as Ahrar al-Sham, Afghan Taliban, Tehreek-e-Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan) and Inspired networks and individuals (CSIS, 2018). Even though these groups follow the same Jihadist ideology, the factors that lead to an individual joining these groups will differ.

Despite ideology and the search for either a religious or ethnic identity being the key driving force of all ethnic and religious violent extremist groups, they are certainly not the primary and only factors that drives radicalisation which in turn leads to violent extremism. Many Jihadist groups have strong political goals and these groups use religion as a tactic designed to conceal their political objectives and to boost popular support. Since the end of the Cold War, religion and ethnic identities being used as the justification to commit acts of terrorism have become a prevailing global security challenge (Hoffman, 1999). Some scholars have asserted that religious violent extremism is often influenced by geopolitical factors (Rogers, 2007; Juergensmeyer, 2004).

Lydia Wilson, a research fellow at the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict, University of Oxford, in her interviews with captured ISIS combatants asserted that a majority of Jihadists were 'woefully ignorant about Islam and have difficulty answering questions about Sharia law, militant jihad, and the caliphate' (The Nation, 2015). Counterterrorism expert, Dr. Bruce Hoffman argues that religion is used as a means of communication in contemporary terrorism (Religoscope, 2002).

These findings by experts and scholars in the field of violent extremism debunk the longstanding myth that ideology is the primary and only factor driving religious violent extremist groups.

### A. B. The catalyst

The factors that influence an individual to join the Salafi Jihadist movement back in the 1980s differed greatly to those joining groups such as Al-Qaida in the wake of 9/11 or ISIS in recent times. In the same manner the impetus for an individual from the U.S. or a Western state to join ISIS would greatly differ from an individual who lives in the theatre of conflict in Iraq, Syria or Afghanistan. The rise and growth of violent extremist groups have often been defined by catalyst or trigger events which creates a space

for individuals to turn towards violence. The experience of a ‘catalyst event’ along with a broad socialization process and exposure to propaganda which can motivate an individual to join a terrorist organization is a key stage in the evolution of a suicide bomber (Gill, 2007).

During the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, Cold War geopolitics culminated with Iran emerging as a theocratic Shia state following its revolution were catalysts that empowered the Wahhabi ideology of the Mujahideen combatants and their foreign fighters. The U.S. was viewed as a key ally that provided arms, training and funding to the Mujahideen, while the Soviet Union and communism was viewed as the enemy of Islam. Factors related to the U.S. influence in the Middle East and their close alliance with Israel in the region along with local grievances in the Arab states helped turn the ideological tide of Al-Qaeda who later focused on targeting the U.S. and their allies.

Similarly, the Iraqi invasion which led to the overthrow of Saddam Hussain’s secular Ba’athist government, insurgency against the Shia Muslims in Iraq, the Arab spring and the Syrian conflict can be viewed as catalysts or trigger events which helped spawn and grow ISIS.

The LTTE ambush on the Sri Lanka Army patrol unit Four Four Bravo which led to the death of 13 soldiers which was eventually followed by the 1983 Black July riots was a catalyst that strengthened the cause advocated by the LTTE which emerged as one of the most sophisticated terrorist groups in modern times. The 1983 riots were a defining moment for the LTTE to recruit thousands of Tamil civilians by amplifying the grievances of the Tamil community and justifying armed violence and terror in the name of liberation.

When a state is faced with deeply existential contextual and structural issues, social and political trigger events act as catalysts which can strengthen the resolve of violent extremist groups to justify their reasons to use violence and recruit combatants for their cause. Many of these events often emerge from internal conflict, political upheavals, social injustices and marginalization of communities. These events have played into the hands of violent extremist groups which seek to take advantage of such catalysts to transcend into a more dominant

position which would enable these groups to boost their support and recruitment drive.

**B. Radicalization is a process**

There is no single profile common for a violent extremist as those who are radicalised come from diverse social backgrounds, education backgrounds, socio-economic classes, genders and age categories.

When examining the 4/21 Easter Sunday bombings, some of the perpetrators were from affluent backgrounds and have received higher education at reputed universities overseas while the others were from a war battered region that was under the grip of extremism, which proves the fact that there is no common profile to identify a violent extremist suicide bomber. Individuals who join Salafi Jihadist or any form of religious violent extremist group have gone through the process of radicalisation.

Radicalisation is a process which occurs based on what is identified as ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. Push factors are the conditions conducive for violent extremism to breed and the structural context from which it emerges. The pull factors are the individual motivations and processes, which transforms ideas and grievances into violent extremist action.

Push factors	Pull factors
Alienation, isolation and identity question	To have a sense of belonging within a particular group
Feeling your “in group/ community” is under attack	Belief that it’s a spiritual or sanctified purpose; creating a utopia
Feeling that larger powers are not doing much to stop discrimination and attacks	Empowerment: adventure, humanitarian cause, die a martyr
Polarization, discrimination and lack of integration among communities	The desire to change the status quo
Social and political injustice	

Radicalization leading to violence may take diverse forms depending on the context and time period, and it will be associated with different causes or ideologies. Identity and religion are

often intertwined in the ideology of violent extremist groups and the perceived threat to an identity is a key aspect in religious extremism due to religion having the unique ability to serve identity needs (Seul, 1999). The fundamental facets embedded in non-Western religious extremist groups is that such groups project the feeling that the growing influence of globalisation, secularisation, and Westernisation are undermining traditional non-Western values and ways of life (Moghadam, 2005). The identifiable precursors of home-grown radicalisation are: socio-political alienation, religiosity and globalisation, and the reaction to foreign policy (Wilner and Dubouloz 2010).

#### B. D. Dilemma of the War on Terror

The U.S. has spent 5.9 trillion U.S. dollars on the global counter terrorism campaigns since 9/11 (Watson Institute, 2018). In 2015, ISIS, Boko Haram, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda which are the top four Salafi Jihad terror groups were responsible for 74% of all terrorism related deaths across the globe (Global Terrorism Index, 2016) and consists of over 230,000 Salafi Jihadist combatants that are spread across 70 countries (Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2018). These facts clearly indicate that the U.S. is facing major setbacks and strategic challenges in its War on Terror campaign.

Despite military setbacks and loss of territory, Salafi Jihadist groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaida are still capable of influencing their target audience through the use of strategic communication campaigns (NATO StratCom COE, 2015) and are able to inspire individuals and independent networks to join their cause.

Two fundamental factors which led to the failure in the War on Terror was because the U.S. policy makers had inflated assessments of the terror threat, which led to an expansive counterterrorism campaign and the adoption of an aggressive military intervention strategy which did not focus on addressing the root causes (Thrall and Goepner, 2017).

The U.S. counterterrorism strategy have also led to Islamophobia and hate crimes against the Muslim community, which is a significant driver towards homegrown radicalisation, giving rise to lone wolf terrorists and inspired networks. The current trend of violent extremism has led to many states realigning its counter extremism

strategy to win the hearts and minds of communities affected by violent extremism in order to combat the factors that lead to radicalization.

#### E. The evolution of Jihadists in Sri Lanka

The formation of Jihadist militant groups in Sri Lanka can be viewed as a byproduct of three decades of conflict with the LTTE which evolved during several timeframes. As Salafi Jihadist terrorism was taking shape around the globe, in 1990 the LTTE commenced a campaign of terror against the Muslim population in Sri Lanka's north and east. The continuous attacks on the Muslim community in the region by the LTTE led to the formation of these militant groups (Sunday Times, 2009).

The LTTE perceived the Muslims living in the region as collaborators with the state and a hindrance to their objective of establishing a mono-ethnic Tamil homeland. Many analysts and scholars have viewed the atrocities committed by the LTTE against the Muslim community in the north and east as acts of ethnic cleansing.

In August, 1990, the LTTE massacre of 147 civilians including children that had gathered for congregational prayers in four mosques in the Eastern town of Kattankudy (Amnesty International, 1991) was the first catalyst which laid the foundation for armed Muslim militancy in the East. The LTTE went on to commit atrocities in predominant Muslim villages in Batticaloa, Mulliyankadu, Ampara, Eravur, Vavuniya, Palliyagodella and Punani.

The second event which acts as a catalyst for the rise of Jihadist militancy in the island was the overnight expulsion of approximately 72,000 Muslims in the North by the LTTE which took place in October 1990. The ramifications of the atrocities committed by the LTTE consequently led to the government establishing the homeguards with some of the Muslim homeguards in the East deserting their posts and forming into small militant groups (Hoole, 2019).

The political landscape also played a significant role in fomenting militant sentiments among the communities. Eventually, many Islamic preachers who had been influenced by Wahhabism in the Middle East upon returning to Kattankudy and parts of the Eastern Province, commenced a drive to provide the conflict a religious dimension,

which gave birth to more radicalised Jihadist militants. Many of these Jihadist groups were receiving funding from Middle Eastern organisations through their Wahhabi preachers and local political sponsors (Sunday Times, 2009).

Even though the global Salafi Jihadist movement was gaining prominence following the 9/11 attacks, the Jihadist militant groups in the East identified as Mujahideen, Knox Group, Osama Group, Jihad Group and Muttur Jetty Group C. viewed the LTTE and secular Muslims in the region that followed other Islamic sects as a greater threat to them than the U.S. and its coalition partners that were fighting against Al-Qaida and other Salafi Jihadist groups across the world. The fact that local Jihadist groups were initially being fueled by local drivers and not the global anti-Western Jihadist drivers is clearly established in a confidential U.S. diplomatic cable disseminated on July 17, 2003 by a senior diplomatic official who revealed that the Muslims in the east have formed 'anti-Tamil Tiger armed groups' and the very limited Islamist feeling that there is in Sri Lanka flows from the Muslim community's fear of the LTTE and not from the anti-U.S., anti-Israel theme which is widespread in the Middle East (Colombo Telegraph, 2013; Wikileaks, 2013).

Groups such as the Sri Lanka Thowheeth Jama'ath (SLTJ) which maintains close affiliation to the Tamil Nadu Thowheeth Jama'ath were actively engaged in promoting Wahhabism in the eastern province (Dharmawardhane, 2015). Zahran Cassim's NTJ was a breakaway group of SLTJ. By 2009, Zahran Cassim who was the propaganda secretary for the Thowheeth group confessed in an interview that he had a base of over 2,000 followers who are part of his congregation, which serves as the ideal platform for radicalisation and recruitment (Sunday Times, 2009).

During the final years of Sri Lanka's war and during the immediate post-war period, the ensuing internal divisions which were intensified by the influence of Wahhabism frequently led to sectarian violence with the Jihadist groups perpetrating attacks on the Muslims who refused to adhere to their ideology. On several occasions the Jihadists backed by the Thowheeth Jama'ath preachers conducted attacks on moderate Muslims in Kattankudy which led to the destruction of Sufi mosques, Sufi meditation

centers and property which belonged to followers of other Islamic sects in the East resulting in many being displaced and forced out of the region (Fuard, 2006a; Fuard, 2006b; Kamalendran and Fuard, 2009). Following the sequence of events related to extremist violence perpetrated by the Jihadist militants in 2009, the government issued an amnesty for Jihad militants in the East to surrender their weapons to a Mosque in Kattankudy (Sunday Times, 2009).

F. The emergence of transnational Jihad  
Globalization, advancements in technology, communication and transportation has helped expand the influence, scope and range of terrorist ideologies and their narratives, thus giving rise to transnational terror groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda which operates beyond borders. The advancement in information technology and the ability for ISIS to exploit social media led the extremist group to gain a large following, gain support from local militant groups and inspired networks that pledge their allegiance to ISIS leader at the time, Abu Bakr al- Bagdhadi.

Zahran Cassim and his followers from NTJ is a classic example of a group that had been inspired by the ISIS ideology of establishing a Caliphate. Many of those who have been radicalised, recruited or inspired to become a Jihadist extremist perceive that Islam is under threat from the U.S. and its allies and believe that it is their divine duty to join ISIS in their fight against their enemies in order to establish a pan-Islamist theocratic state governed by Sharia law interpreted by Wahhabism.

With the rapid advancement in information communication technology, many of these local Jihadist militants and Thowheeth preachers such as Zahran Cassim began to have easier access and a steady flow of information on Salafi Jihad across the globe. Concurrently, they were able to create a large gathering of followers by propagating the ISIS ideology and their brand of extremism which eventually led to the emergence of Sri Lankan nationals joining ISIS either as foreign fighters or as inspired homegrown violent extremists.

According to the ISIS propaganda magazine – Dabiq, several Sri Lankans had joined ISIS to fight in Syria and it was also reported that a Sri Lankan national from Kurunegala had been killed in an air strike while fighting for the Islamic State (Asian Mirror, 2015; Daily Mirror, 2015). In 2015,

it transpired that ISIS was on a drive to radicalize and recruit youths from India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, which further validates the 2016 U.S. Country Report on Terrorism which indicated that intelligence agencies were on full alert against the possibility of ISIS or its affiliates emerging in the island.

Following the conclusion of the war in 2009, the emergence of radical Sinhala Buddhist Ultranationalist extremist groups such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Sinha Le, Sihala Ravaya, Mahason Balakaya and Ravana Balakaya that were gaining momentum began to create ethnic tension by actively engaging in hate speeches and attacks on the Muslim community while inciting violence against other ethnic and religious groups.

The 2014, BBS attack on the Muslim community in Aluthgama and Dharga Town following a racially charged hate speech was a key trigger event which set the precedence for a sequence of anti-Muslim violence leading to polarization of communities. The actions of

groups such as BBS, Sinha Le and Mahason Balakaya paved a path for secular Muslims to be more easily approached by Islamist extremist groups such as NTJ that were able to project these events to their advantage.

The 2018 anti-Muslim riots which led to widespread attacks on the Muslim community in Kandy and Ampara which was orchestrated by the Sinhala ultranationalist extremist group, Mahason Balakaya was a key trigger event which acts as a catalyst which created an environment for extremism to breed and also for Sri Lanka to become influenced by transnational Jihadist extremism which was sweeping across the globe. The riots presented itself as an opportunity for Salafi Jihadist advocates in the country to gain a support base by projecting the image of widescale persecution of Muslims. The Buddha statues in Mawanella which was vandalized in 2018 by Thowheeth extremists was a result of the anti-Muslim riots which created further tension amongst communities.

Several months after the vandalizing of the Buddha statues, on Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019, Zahran Cassim and his outfit from NTJ detonated multiple suicide bombs in hotels and churches in the island which resulted in the death of 269 people. In the wake of the 4/21 attacks, the lack

of a proper state response, lack of accountability and identity politics created an environment which led to further attacks on the Muslim community.

Islamic State which has achieved fluidity and absorbed followers from around the globe, is a model of the new face of terrorism that can operate outside of any centralizing force or command structure (Vidanage, 2019). With the reach and influence ISIS currently possess, the structural and contextual drivers of Islamist extremism will further reinforce Salafi Jihadist thinking within any polarized group that is susceptible to radicalisation.

## Conclusion

The mindset of perceived injustice, discrimination and oppression is what motivates violent extremists to take up arms and conduct asymmetric attacks primarily on soft targets. Once a violent extremist evolves into a fully-fledged terrorist, they view themselves as freedom fighters or holy warriors who are fighting a just war. Any form of brutal crackdown that leads to polarization, social stigma or political repression of the broader community will ignite violent extremist sentiments.

The drivers of Salafi Jihadist extremism in Sri Lanka can be framed within two distinct periods that reshaped and redefined Jihadist militancy and terrorism in the island. The timeframes in which Islamist extremism evolved in the island which emerged in two separate waves can be categorised as;

- a). Local Sectarian Jihadist Wave (1990- 2010)
- b). Transnational Jihadist Wave (2014 to date)

The Local Sectarian Jihadist Wave emerged following the ethnic cleansing of Muslims by the LTTE in 1990 and lasted up until 2010 in which many of the Jihadist militants were disarmed and demobilized. The main drivers of the local Jihadist groups operating in the east under the direction of Thowheeth preachers were: (a). the threat to the Muslim community in the region posed by the LTTE (b). ethnocentric political influence in the region (c). the goal of maintaining ideological dominance over other Islamic sects (d). religious factionalism (e). sectarian violence (f). political repression during the period of conflict with the LTTE. The socio-economic drivers similarly played a crucial role in fueling

extremism during this period since many who were financially affected by war were vulnerable to radicalisation.

The Transnational Jihadist Wave emerged following the end of the war in 2009 and was reshaped as a result of the actions of groups such as BBS and the rise of ISIS. Post-war Sri Lanka was experiencing an escalation in the forms of acute, chronic and entrenched religious violence perpetrated by ultranationalist religious extremists that were primarily targeting the Muslim and Christian communities in the island (Gunatilleke, 2015; Gunatilleke, 2018). The 2014 anti-Muslim riots in Beruwala and Aluthgama was the starting point of the evolution of Jihadist sentiments in Sri Lanka with groups such as BBS propagating an Islamophobic narrative. The 2018 anti-Muslim riots which erupted in Ampara and Kandy was the primary catalyst which led to a renewed momentum of Salafi Jihadism in the island.

The rise in Sinhala Buddhist extremist sentiments against the Sri Lankan Muslim community coincide with the ISIS expansion in Iraq and Syria, which fueled a global Islamophobic discourse (Gunasingham, 2019; Fernando, 2018). Sri Lanka is experiencing a part of the global development of transnational Salafi Jihadist terrorism which has evolved from its previous local militant roots with individuals and networks being inspired by the transnational Jihadist discourse. The main drivers of the Transnational Jihadist Wave are: (a). the escalation in identity politics (b). aggressive grassroot propaganda campaigns conducted by Thowheeth extremists and Sinhala Buddhist ultranationalist extremist groups such as BBS (c). renewed ethnocentric and ultranationalist fervor following the end of the war in 2009 (d). the state's failure to prevent communal riots and protect the minority religious communities within the country (e). polarization amongst communities as a result of growing Islamophobia promoted by rightwing ultranationalist extremist groups (f). the rise of ISIS and the call for a global caliphate (g). the regional political influence of former jihadist militants (h). the influence of events taking place in the Salafi Jihadist realm in the global context. Social media and advancements in information technology has been a significant driver in fueling violent extremist groups that have exploited communication platforms to conduct hate

speeches and to disseminate misinformation campaigns.

The construction of group perceptions stemming from perceived collective cultural threats and perceived threats to ethnic identity would lead to increased ethnocentrism in turn leading to conflict and tension amongst communities. There is an urgent need to understand the global security landscape, win the war of narratives and to invest on intelligence and technology which will effectively help counter the threat of transnational extremist terrorism, since Sri Lanka has become a victim to the polarization of narratives coming from both Islamist extremists and Sinhala Buddhist extremists (Vidamage, 2019). In Sri Lanka, disinformation campaigns and perceived threats to ethnic and cultural identities have impeded the nation's ability to build reconciliation, cohesion and national unity. The threat perceptions have often been amplified by both Sinhala extremist and Islamist extremist elements within the country and these perceptions need to be addressed by more moderate and secular voices.

The government, political parties, civil society, media, NGOs and moderate religious leaders need to confront the drivers of the current wave of violent extremism by winning the hearts and minds of the all communities in the island through a unified national narrative. In confronting the threat, the government should not mishandle the issue, adding impetus to radicalisation which could lead to Sinhala Buddhist extremist groups such as BBS or politicians from exploiting a volatile situation to advance their political agendas (Jayasuriya, 2015).

Military interventions and legal sanctions have certain limitations when facing violent extremist groups that incite or perpetrate acts of violence. A solely military response to address the drivers of violent extremism have proven to be ineffective and counterproductive in neutralizing the threat posed by Salafi Jihadists in the strategic domain. In order to win the war against Islamist extremism, it is fundamentally essential to counter these groups within the ideological and online battle spaces (Fuard, 2018) while addressing the drivers which lead to radicalisation.

Therefore, a strategy aimed at Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) should emphasise more on why people are joining violent extremist groups? and how they are being radicalised? In order to neutralize the threat in the local context, the drivers of Jihadist extremism should not be viewed from merely a Western liberal perspective, but should be viewed from a Sri Lankan perspective based on past and contemporary issues which shaped Jihadist militancy and terrorism in the island.

If the drivers of violent extremism are not addressed, Sri Lanka could face the same strategic failures in curtailing all forms of ethnic and religious extremism which many powerful nations have faced. The absence of an inclusive framework to prevent and counter violent extremism have been a major contributory factor which have led to many nation states being ineffective in addressing extremist ideology, narratives and radicalisation.

Racism, hate, bigotry and intolerance towards communities which are the main elements that fuel violent extremist groups is now being propagated to a much larger global audience than ever before. Fake news and disinformation campaigns disseminated by violent extremist organizations are changing the global security landscape. The French Philosopher and writer, Voltaire who once wrote, "Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities," are words which resonate even today. Social media has enabled extremist groups to disseminate conspiracy theories, fake news and misinformation campaigns which have sowed the seeds of division amongst communities and are fueling the flames of hatred and bigotry, which has become one of the greatest global and national security threats of our time. Sri Lanka needs to adopt a multidimensional and integrated PCVE approach which would counter violent extremism in the ideological, psychological, social and online domains. As nation states are challenged by hybrid warfare waged by both state and non-state actors, it is important to keep in mind that you cannot defeat tomorrow's violent extremist by applying yesterday's strategies.

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