

How Terrorism Operates. The Tamil Tigers Case

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Abstract

In the contemporary era, terrorism is a main challenge and a key concept for security strategies all around the world. This article approaches the hypothesis according to which, in order to effectively respond to terrorist threats, it is vital to know how terrorists think and operate. This paper draws on the Sri Lankan experience and uses the Tamil Tigers case to analyse the tactics of one of the most reputed and dangerous terrorist organizations in the world.

Keywords: war on terrorism, security challenge, intelligence, Tamil Tigers.

New Wars vs. Old Wars¹

The dynamic of war has changed. According to Mary Kaldor, the world is dealing with a new kind of warfare, different from what the author calls “old” wars. The latter took place at an inter-state level, had territorial objectives, were conducted symmetrically and were regulated by peace treaties and international law. “New” wars are different from “old” wars in terms of actors, objectives and methods. Kaldor states that “new wars are fought by varying combinations of networks of state and non-state actors”², like criminal gangs and terrorist groups, whose goals are linked to identity (religious, ethnic etc.). Also, she emphasises that “in old wars, battle was the

¹ Theory developed by Mary Kaldor in *New and Old wars: Organized violence in a global era*, 1st edition. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.

² Kaldor, Mary, “In Defence of New Wars” in *International Journal Stability of Security & Development*, available at <http://www.stabilityjournal.org/article/view/sta.at/41>, accessed on 10.05.2014.

decisive encounter. The method of waging war consisted of capturing territory through military means. In new wars, battles are rare and territory is captured through political means, through control of the population. A typical technique is population displacement – the forcible removal of those with a different identity or different opinions.”³ Therefore, there are a lot of civilians among victims, because unlike in “old” wars, carried by armies wearing uniforms, in “new” wars it is hard sometimes to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants.

This new paradigm of warfare demands us to conceive security strategies that can respond to the serious threats these asymmetrical, often “unending” wars pose. In Kaldor’s opinion, it “can’t be done through classic war fighting”, but it’s possible “through new defensive uses of forces aimed at prevention, protection and stabilization rather than victory”⁴.

Terrorism - a main security challenge

After the attacks of September 11th, 2001, President George W. Bush declared a “war on terror”, which “begins with Al Qaeda, but does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.”⁵

The fight against terrorism constitutes currently one of the main focuses of security strategies all around the world. At the same time, it is a very complex and challenging task which requires a profound understanding of what terrorism is and how it operates.

What is terrorism?

Defining terrorism is very important because “it serves to stigmatize certain organizations as it renders the financing of these organizations illegal.”⁶ It is, at the same time, very difficult. Fletcher suggests us to think of terrorism “not as a crime, but as a different dimension of crime, a higher,

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Old Wars, Cold Wars, New Wars and the War on Terror*, lecture given by Professor Mary Kaldor to the Cold War Studies Center, London School of Economics, February 2, 2005.

⁵ George Bush’s speech, held on September 21, 2001, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/21/september11.usa13>, accessed 10.05.2014

⁶ George Fletcher, “The Indefinable Concept of Terrorism” in *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 7.

more dangerous version of crime, a kind of super-crime incorporating some of the characteristics of warfare.”⁷

He identifies 8 traits of terrorism that can vary from case to case, meaning they can apply fully or partially to a particular situation. The first one is the factor of **violence**: terrorism implies a violent attack on human beings. It is followed by what the author calls the “**required intention**”. In other words, a terrorist attack is planned and carried out with a purpose, usually to achieve a political measure through intimidating the population. Another variable concerns the **victims**. Terrorism targets civilians, innocent people, and state officials. As important as establishing the nature of the victims is the link between the offenders and the state. The “**wrongdoers**” are private actors, but that does not exclude the possibility that they are supported or financed by governments. Therefore, indirectly, states can be involved in terrorist acts. Terrorists have a motivation, a **cause**, which they consider to be **just**. In most cases, the cause is linked to identity, whether from an ethnic, religious, racial or ideological point of view. What is condemned as terrorism by victims and third parties, can be seen as legitimate by terrorists and the community they belong to. Moreover, there is a widespread assumption that terrorists are part of a group, and their connection to an **organization** can be decisive when establishing if an attack should be classified as crime or terrorism. An individual is easier to arrest or kill, whereas an organization continues to operate through its many agents, willing to repeat the same act in the future, therefore spreading anxiety. Another aspect emphasized by Fletcher is **theatre**. In other words, there is a dramatic dimension of the terrorist act, which shocks the population, takes everyone by surprise and is intensely debated. Terrorism is closely connected to a public display of violence; otherwise it does not reach its purpose – a strong psychological impact on the population. Last but not least, there is the **absence of guilt**. It is commonly believed that terrorists have no qualms of conscience or fear of repercussions, that they are trained to think that what they are doing is right. This is partially why they are considered so dangerous.⁸

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 8-18.

Terrorism in Sri Lanka. Historical Context

Sri Lanka has been a multiethnic society from the earliest times and confrontations between Sinhalese and Tamils have been regular along the centuries. However, these wars were not so cruel in terms of communal violence compared to the post-independence events that shattered the country. Also, the central issues of pre-colonial confrontations were not ethnicity and culture. Therefore, it seems that the colonial period played an essential role in raising the awareness of Sinhalese and Tamils in regards to the ethnic, linguistic and religious differences between them.⁹

After independence proclaimed in 1948, the tensions accumulated under the divide-and-rule British dominance resulted in an escalating cultural struggle. The main minority group of the island, the Sri Lankan Tamils, felt discriminated by the political measures taken by an almost entirely Sinhalese Government eager to retrieve its ethnic heritage and reaffirm its pre-colonial position. Angered and alienated by the minimal concessions the government was willing to make in order to satisfy their demands, many Tamils youngsters turned to arms, and eventually founded a group in 1976 called the LTTE (The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) or the Tamil Tigers. Convinced that the symbols of their ethnic group were threatened, they demanded a separate state in the northeast part of the island and turned to terrorist activities. Even though no international state recognized Tamil Eelam, parts of the region were under “de facto” control of the Tigers until 2009.¹⁰

The war broke out in 1983 and lasted for 26 years, unleashing massacres of a level of terror that hadn't been seen in the long history of the country. Despite efforts from the international community to mediate and settle the conflict peacefully, the confrontation lasted until 2009, when the LTTE, labeled by more than 32 countries¹¹ as a terrorist organization, was officially defeated by the Sri Lankan military forces.

⁹ Kearney, Robert, “Ethnic Conflict and the Tamil Separatist Movement in Sri Lanka” in *Asian Survey*, University of California Press, Vol. 25, No. 9, 1985, pp. 898-917

¹⁰ DeVotta, N., “Control Democracy, Institutional Decay, and the Quest for Eelam: Explaining Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka” in *Pacific Affairs*, University of British Columbia, Vol. 73, No. 1, 2000, pp. 55-76

¹¹ India, USA, Malaysia, UK, the European Union, Canada

The Tamil Tigers Case

In 2008, FBI stated in a report that “the LTTE is one of the most dangerous and deadly extremist outfits in the world and the world should be concerned about the outfit as they had “inspired” networks worldwide, including the al-Qaeda in Iraq.” To support this statement, FBI indicated that the Tamil Tigers “perfected the use of suicide bombers, invented the suicide belt, pioneered the use of women in suicide attacks and is the only terrorist organization that managed to assassinate two world leaders.”¹²

Given its impact, we will apply the 8 variables Fletcher identified on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, in order to have a better understanding of how a terrorist group thinks and acts.

1. Violence

The LTTE deployed attacks on both public officials and civilians. Their human rights violations are a major reason why they have been banned as a terrorist organization. Even though it labeled itself as a guerilla movement, the organization became famous for its terrorist tactics, like sabotage, intimidation, assassination, bombing and murder. It is important to state that, even though officially fighting for the Tamil community, they did not hesitate to kill Tamil people if they didn't show support or if they tried to escape the war zone.

According to the UN Report of the Secretary General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka, the LTTE “refused civilians permission to leave the conflict zone, using them as hostages, at times using their presence as a strategic human buffer between themselves and the advancing Sri Lankan Army.” Also, people of all ages, including children, were forcibly recruited and ordered to dig trenches, “thereby contributing to blurring the distinction between combatants and civilians.” Moreover, the Tigers are accused of using military equipment in the proximity of civilians and killing civilians through suicide attacks.¹³

¹² FBI, “Taming the Tamil Tigers From Here in the U.S”, available at http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2008/january/tamil_tigers011008, accessed 02.06.2014.

¹³ „UN Report of the Secretary General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka”, March 2011, page iii.

Glen Jenvey, a reputed specialist in international terrorism, labeled the LTTE as the inventor of the modern suicide bomber. The LTTE's special unit, called "The Black Tigers", carried out an impressive number of 168 suicide attacks. There are suspicions this tactic has been copied by Islamic groups, including Al-Qaeda, supported by the similarity between the LTTE attack on the World Trade Center in Sri Lanka and the Al-Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center in New York, and the resemblances between the Al-Qaeda bombings in London, on July 2005 and the LTTE attacks on the public transportation system in Sri Lanka.¹⁴

2. The required intention

The objective of the Tigers was to create a new state for the Tamils of Sri Lanka - "Eezham" (Eelam in English), in the northern and the eastern parts of the island.

3. The victims

The LTTE is the only terrorist organization in the world that has managed to kill two world leaders – Rajeev Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, in 1991, and Ranasinghe Premadasa, President of Sri Lanka, in 1993. They carried attacks on political rivals and opponents. For a group claiming to protect the Tamil cause, they paradoxically murdered Tamils politicians that were more moderate and tried to reach a peaceful agreement. Also, they systematically targeted civilians by placing explosives in buses, trains, temples, mosques and banks. According to the Sri Lankan Ministry of Defense, large quantities of explosives were transported throughout the country in hidden compartments of tractors and buses.¹⁵

4. The wrongdoers

The number of cadres fighting for the LTTE fluctuated during the years and, at times, was almost impossible to estimate by the Government. At its most, it is believed that the organization counted on about 18.000 cadres. A significant proportion was represented by children, turned into

¹⁴ „Al-Qaeda follows LTTE text book on terror faithfully” in *Asian Tribune*, available at <http://www.asiantribune.com/index.php?q=node/4518>, accessed 02.06.2014.

¹⁵ The Sri Lankan Ministry of Defense, „The LTTE in brief”, available at www.defence.lk/pps/LTTEinbrief.pdf, accessed 03.06.2014.

soldiers through forcible recruitment, and women (up to 30%). All of them were carefully trained to handle weapons and explosives and to gather intelligence.¹⁶

5. The just cause

Tamils fighting for the LTTE had a strong motivation linked to the Tamil identity and believed that their actions were legitimate. The leader himself, Prabhakaran, claimed that “the LTTE killed only with a justified reason and in the fight for Tamil freedom.”¹⁷ This perception developed around several sentiments, like fear that Tamil’s civil rights in Sri Lanka were threatened by the political measures taken by Sinhalese leaders, responsibility to protect the Tamil customs, values and traditions,¹⁸ anger against a government that had denominated Sinhala the official language of the country and had given Buddhism a superior status in the Constitution. They felt disregarded and marginalized by the island’s main ethnic group and decided a separate state would be the solution to country’s “ethnic problem”.¹⁹

6. Organization

Extremely well organized and disciplined, the group was coordinated by Velupillai Prabhakaran and had three main branches: “Military Tigers”, “Sea Tigers” and “Air Tigers”. Apart from these, the organization benefited also from a political wing, a finance wing, a women’s wing called Birds of Freedom and a suicide commando wing entitled the Black Tigers.²⁰ To this the Leopold Brigade (orphan children) and the Internet Black Tigers (the first cyber-terrorist group) were added.²¹ The latter attacked the e-mail systems of several Sri Lankan embassies, with the declared purpose of fighting the governmental propaganda.²²

¹⁶ “Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam”, available at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/shrilanka/terroristoutfits/LTTE.HTM>, accessed 03.06.2014.

¹⁷ Jerrold M Post, „The Mind of the Terrorist: the Psychology of Terrorism from the IRA to Al-Qaeda”, p. 87-.

¹⁸ Most Sinhalese speak Sinhala and are Buddhists, whereas most Tamils speak Tamil and are Hindu.

¹⁹ Viziru, Mirela, „The cultural dimension of the Sri Lankan civil war” in *Romanian Review of Political Sciences and International Relations*, Vol. XI, 2014.

²⁰ Michael P Arena, Bruce A Arrigo, „The Terrorist Identity: Explaining the Terrorist Threat”, New York University Press, 2006, p. 94.

²¹ Jerrold M Post, *op cit*, p. 93.

²² The US State Department, „Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1997”, april 1998, p. 12.

The headquarters were placed in the Wanni region, in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. The LTTE had its own intelligence system that operated through informers, both inside and outside the state. Within the country, there was a network of checkpoints whose purpose was to identify and supervise outsiders that would penetrate the area controlled by them. At an international level, it is believed that they had centers in no less than 54 countries, where they conducted fundraising and propaganda to buy explosives and weapons. The main support came from the countries with the largest number of Tamil inhabitants, like UK, Germany, Canada and Switzerland. However, the LTTE also operated in the United States²³.

In 2008, FBI revealed they had arrested the U.S. director of the Tigers and 11 other suspects and advised Americans to be careful with their donations, because the Tigers were raising money under different covers, often for “charity.”²⁴ The criminal activities ran by the LTTE show a very dangerous and complex outfit. Apart from fundraising and propaganda, the Tigers gathered money through extortion, sea piracy, human smuggling, passport forgery, drug trafficking and arms smuggling.

7. Theatre

The LTTE deployed numerous attacks on a wide range of targets, like military facilities, buses, trains, temples, mosques, banks or national symbols. One of their most successful operations was the 1997 attack on the World Trade Center of Colombo, a newly constructed building of major economic importance. A suicide team formed of 5 cadres managed to bomb the complex only three days after it had been inaugurated. The WTC had been chosen as a metaphor to the Sri Lankan economy. Apart from destabilizing the country’s economy, the LTTE wanted to create a diversion from the war in the north, where the Sri Lankan authorities were gaining control and had concentrated most of their capabilities.

Peter Chalk cited the “government’s misuse of vital intelligence resources” as one of the reasons why the attack was successful. He also explained that the WTC attacks “demonstrated to the LTTE that terrorism in

²³ Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, available at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/shrilanka/terroristoutfits/LTTE.HTM>, accessed 06.06.2014.

²⁴ FBI, “Taming the Tamil Tigers From Here in the U.S”, available at http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2008/january/tamil_tigers011008, accessed 07.06.2014.

Colombo was a useful tool for opening up multiple theatres”, which, for the next years of the conflict, prevented the country’s defense apparatus to concentrate its full capabilities against the north.²⁵ After the 9/11 attacks, Washington decided to expand its cooperation on matters of counterterrorism with the Sri Lankan authorities. Other countries, like France, and Germany, condemned the actions of the Tigers as well. So, on the long run, the WTC attack was a loss for the LTTE because it determined the Sri Lankan government to adopt a more efficient defensible space policy, and also generated a more supportive international context.²⁶

8. The absence of guilt

It is hard to prove that the LTTE fighting cadre didn’t feel guilty at all, especially since many of them had been integrated in the organization through forcible recruitment. In turn, independently from what they felt, the Tigers were rigorously indoctrinated to die for the cause. Each and one of them carried a capsule of cyanide around their necks and were ready to swallow it to evade capture. Their training turned around the cult of martyrdom. All of them were supposed to die for the “mission” and were known for a high sense of dedication.²⁷ Prabhakaran portrayed best the profile of a Black Tiger during a speech he held in 1993: “The Black Tigers are different and also unique human beings. They possess an iron will, yet their hearts are so very soft. The Black Tigers have cast away fear from its very roots. Death has surrendered to them. They keep eagerly waiting for the day they would die.”²⁸

Generalizing the Sri Lankan experience to draw conclusions on how a terrorist threat should be handled

It took the Sri Lankan authorities 26 years to end the conflict with the LTTE and it is going to take Sri Lanka a longer time to recover socially and economically.

²⁵ P. Chalk, *Encyclopedia of Terrorism*, Vol. I, p. 171

²⁶ Idem, p. 172

²⁷ “Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam”, available at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/shrilanka/terroristoutfits/LTTE.HTM>, accessed 07.06.2014.

²⁸ Jerrold M Post, *op cit.*, p. 93.

Undoubtedly, the key moment in defeating the Tigers was killing the leadership. Prabhakaran proved to be, on the one hand, a very powerful and charismatic leader, and determined the Tamil people to join the fight against the Sri Lankan government. He was the founder of LTTE and the force that kept the organization together. His followers saw him as a hero and had full faith in him – “They love him and adore him as mother, father, brother or god”.²⁹ On the other hand, he was a very elusive target. He was killed by the Sri Lankan military forces on May 18, 2009 and, immediately after his death, the LTTE disintegrated the war ended.³⁰ We can infer that the high echelons of terrorist organization are a key vulnerability that can and should be exploited in counterterrorism.

Also, given LTTE’s high degree of sophistication (innovative tactics, external linkage, intelligence gathering, a wide range of criminal activities), it is clear that international cooperation between intelligence services is essential in order to permanently update security strategies to the fast evolution of terrorist tactics. The Country Reports in Terrorism submitted to the US Congress in 2010 stated that “Sri Lankan cooperation with the FBI has resulted in arrests of persons charged with material support to terrorist groups.”³¹

Last but not least, the new kind of warfare identified by Kaldor in the contemporary era demands anti-terrorism strategies to focus on prevention and stabilization. By this principle, it is more effective to anticipate a threat and use the intelligence resources to eradicate it, than to control the situation once it has expanded and the organization has opened multiple theatres. Victory over the LTTE meant an important step forward for Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, it was obtained with tremendous human, social and financial costs.

²⁹ Jerrold M Post – *op cit.*, p. 91, declaration of a young LTTE cadre.

³⁰ „Defeating Terrorism – Why the Tamil Tigers Lost Eelam and How Sri Lanka Won the War”, available at <http://www.jinsa.org/publications/global-briefing/defeating-terrorism-why-tamil-tigers-lost-eelamand-how-sri-lanka-won-wa>, accessed 15.06.2014.

³¹ Ministry of Defense and Urban Development of Sri Lanka, „LTTE provides innovative terror tactics to other terrorist groups – the USA”, available at http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20070503_03.

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