

Text of the speech by the Ambassador of Sri Lanka to The Netherlands, A.M.J. Sadiq at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague on 17th May 2019

At the very outset, I wish to thank Dr Rummyana van Ark of the Asser Institute, hosting this conference on a very topical theme, "Lessons from the Past, Dilemmas of the Present and Challenges of the Future: What is an effective Counter-Terrorism strategy?", for affording me the opportunity to address this distinguished gathering of diplomats, academics, legal and security experts and scholars.

Sri Lanka is no stranger to terrorism. Tomorrow, 18th May, Sri Lanka would be marking the 10th anniversary of victory over terrorism, following the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), culminating in the elimination of its leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran and his top lieutenants in the final days of the conflict.

In January 2008, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) describing the LTTE as the "most dangerous and deadly extremist" outfit in the world, warned donors to be careful about charities established as front organisations by the LTTE to raise funds to finance its terrorist activities.

The group, the FBI said, had placed operatives right in the United States to discreetly raise money to purchase weapons and explosives and to fund its "terrorist campaign" in Sri Lanka. LTTE has "quite a resume" as a terrorist group, which is credited with perfecting the use of suicides bombers, inventing suicide belts and pioneering the use of women in suicide attacks, it said. The FBI further stated that the LTTE's "ruthless tactics" had inspired terrorist networks worldwide, including the al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The annihilation of the military leadership of the LTTE was a decisive and a significant factor in bringing the conflict that had claimed the lives of thousands of civilians, caused the internal displacement as well as the exodus of several thousand others abroad, and indeed a devastating impact on the economy, to an immediate end.

The decade old relative peace and stability that Sri Lanka enjoyed, spurring rapid economic growth and a booming tourism industry, was shattered on Easter Sunday, 21st April by the multiple suicide terrorist bombings that struck the nation, came not only as a rude shock to the people of Sri Lanka, but outraged the conscience of the world, for its sheer barbarity and well-coordinated nature, targeting Christian worshippers attending Easter Mass at three churches in Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa, as well as three luxury hotels in Colombo on the same day, in which over 250 people lost their lives, including 45 foreigners, leaving more than 400 others wounded, many with life changing injuries.

I speak today, not only as the Ambassador of Sri Lanka to The Netherlands, but also to share my personal perspective as a Muslim in strongly denouncing the terrorist outrage in my country on Easter Sunday, for which the ISIS has claimed responsibility. I do so with a disclaimer that I am neither an Islamic theologian nor even a scholar of Islam, but merely as a humble follower of the religion.

In the immediate aftermath of the terror attacks, the government declared a 'state of emergency' under the Public Security Ordinance and invoked the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act, No. 48 of 1979 to apprehend the perpetrators of the local terror network of the ISIS, the National Thowheed Jama'ath (NTJ). More recently, on 13th May, the government proscribed the NTJ and two affiliates, namely, Jama'athe Milla'athe Ibrahim (JMI) and Willayath As Seylani, under the provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

While the authorities have been successful in rounding up most of the active members of the local terror network, the bigger challenge, not only for Sri Lanka, but for the entire international community is to combat and root out the evil ideology which motivates so-called "Muslims" to kill innocent people.

Islam literally means "Peace" and is a religion of moderation. Therefore, associating Islam with extremism or terrorism is downright wrong, just as much as linking the cold blooded slaughter of 51 Muslims attending Jummah prayers on Friday, 15th March this year at 2 mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand with Christianity.

While not in any manner trying to diminish the savagery or the magnitude of the Easter Sunday carnage in Sri Lanka, a lesser known fact is that ISIS and its affiliates are responsible for the killing of more Muslims, than non-Muslims.

On 24 November 2017, ISIS gunmen attacked the al-Rawda mosque in Egypt's North Sinai, during Friday prayers, killing 311 worshippers and injuring at least 122, making it the deadliest terrorist attack in Egyptian history. It was the second-deadliest terrorist attack of 2017, after the Mogadishu bombings by Al-Shabab terrorists on 14 October 2017 that killed at least 587 people.

On 16 December 2014, six gunmen affiliated with the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) attacked the Army Public School in Peshawar, Pakistan, killing 149 people including 132 schoolchildren, ranging between eight and eighteen years of age.

Whether it is ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Taliban, Al-Shabab or Boko Haram, all these terrorist outfits derive inspiration from a deviant and satanic cult that purports to be authentic Islam. What makes this ideology toxic and a threat to world peace and security is the Takfir doctrine, underpinning it, by which its followers claim the right to kill non-Muslims, as well as Muslims, whom they brand as heretics, such as Shia and Sufi Muslims.

Mainstream Muslims utterly reject this doctrine as antithetical to the core principles and beliefs of Islam. Even prominent Muslim Brotherhood theologians such as Hasan al-Hudaybi and Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi have denounced Takfir as un-Islamic for its bigotry. The need of the hour is to build a strong consensus among the leading Islamic academics and theologians in the world by taking a collective and unified stand against the Takfir doctrine, which defines the 18th century ideology, claiming to be the true and pristine Islam.

Regrettably, this hate filled ideology is being spread around the world, notably through foreign funded madrasas, and on social media, indoctrinating impressionable young people with its vile incitement to violence.

This deviant ideology has been the principal cause of Islamophobia, fuelling suspicion and enmity towards Muslims who have hitherto been living peacefully as minorities in many non-Muslim countries, as we sadly see today in my own country, with the outbreak of sporadic attacks on mosques and Muslim owned properties. In the anti-Muslim rioting that started last Sunday, mobs moved through towns in the North-Western Province, looting houses and properties of Muslims, ransacking mosques, burning Qurans and attacking shops with petrol bombs. The government imposed a nation-wide dusk to dawn curfew over two days to quell the violence.

The telecommunications regulator on Tuesday, 14th May, extended a social media ban to Twitter. Earlier, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube and Instagram had been blocked to prevent the spread of messages inciting violence.

The Archbishop of Colombo, His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith has emerged as a voice of sanity amidst the discordant cacophony of bloodthirsty rabble rousers, baying for the blood of Muslims urging those involved in violence against the Muslim community to immediately stop these attacks. He also urged the Muslims not to get intimidated by these sinister elements and to act patiently and remain calm.

The Holy Qur'an is quite explicit in upholding the freedom of religion. In Chapter 2, verse 256, it says:

“There shall be no compulsion in religion.”

Moreover, suicide is expressly forbidden in Islam, and if a Muslim commits suicide, then he or she dies as a disbeliever. Thus, the All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulema, the Supreme Council of Muslim Theologians in Sri Lanka took the correct decision to deny permission for the burial of the remains of the Easter Sunday suicide bombers in Muslim graveyards.

The Holy Quran is also quite categorical in forbidding the killing of any person without just cause. Chapter 5, verse 32 states as follows:

“On that account: We ordained for the Children of Israel that if any one slew a person - unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land - it would be as if he slew the whole mankind: and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the entire humanity”.

Ali, the fourth Caliph and son-in-law of the Holy Prophet when asked about his attitude towards non-Muslims is reported to have said, “A person is either your brother in faith, or your equal in humanity”.

In 628 AD, a Christian delegation from St. Catherine’s Monastery in Mount Sinai, Egypt came to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and requested his protection. He granted them protection and provided them with a letter which is called the “Charter of Privileges.” The original letter can be found at the Royal Treasury in Istanbul, Turkey. A copy is preserved and is on display at the St. Catherine’s Monastery.

The letter reads thus:

“This is a message from Muhammad, son of Abdullah, as a Covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, we are with them.

Verily I, the servants, the helpers, and my followers defend them, because Christians are my citizens; and by Allah! I hold out against anything that displeases them. No compulsion is to be on them. Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs nor their monks from their monasteries.

No one is to destroy a house of their religion, to damage it, or to carry anything from it to the Muslims’ houses. Should anyone take any of these, he would spoil God’s Covenant and disobey His Prophet. Verily, they are my allies and have my secure Charter against all that they hate.

No one is to force them to travel or to oblige them to fight. The Muslims are to fight for them. If a female Christian is married to a Muslim, it is not to take place without her approval. She is not to be prevented from visiting her church to pray.

Their churches are to be respected. They are neither to be prevented from repairing them nor the sanctity of their covenants. No one of the nation of (Muslims) is to disobey the Covenant till the Last Day (end of the world).”

Dr. A. Zahoor and Dr. Z. Haq

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This sacred document gives a clear order of protection, in the name of Islam, for the people of the book, meaning the Jews and the Christians.

In the modern context, the protection would extend to everybody, irrespective of their affiliation to a particular faith or no faith, drawing from the Holy Qur'an, Chapter 109, verse 6, which states thus:

“For you is your religion, and for me is my religion.”

It is likely that very few Muslims around the world are aware that this covenant exists, leave alone non-Muslims.

During these days when violence in the name of religion is widespread, it is even more significant to raise worldwide awareness of this covenant of protection. I strongly believe that this covenant should be used to effectively counter and oppose the extremist agendas of those who have insulted and sullied Islam by encouraging violence and hatred in its name.

Thank you.