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Book Reviews

Rohan Gunaratna, *Sri Lanka's Easter Sunday Massacre: Lessons for International Community*. Penguin Radom House, Singapore, 2023. pp. 238. ISBN 9789814954631.

Reviewer: Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, International Islamic University Malaysia. Email: zackyfouz@iiu.edu.my

Rohan Gunaratna's recent publication titled *Sri Lanka's Easter Sunday Massacre: Lessons for International Community* tries to explore the "Easter Attack massacre" and its root causes in Sri Lanka. The work would indeed become one of the main references for those interested in exploring the sources and roots of the Easter Attack. Although the Easter Sunday massacre was a watershed event in Sri Lankan history as well as the 'September 11' of Sri Lankan Muslims, there has been a lack of detailed analysis on the subject thus far. In this sense, Gunaratna's work could be seen as the first detailed study of the tragedy, elaborating on the background of the bombers, their preparations, and the execution. In the aftermath of the attack, there has been a serious public debate on the nature of tragedy and its root causes. Participating in this debate, Imthiyaz Razak argued that the Easter attacks were a by-product of both "violence against Muslims since 2012", unleashed by the Sinhala-Buddhist extremists and cultural exclusivism of Muslims, enabled by the political bargaining between the majoritarian state and minority political elites.¹ For his part, Rajan Hoole argued in his work *Sri Lanka's Easter Tragedy* that the Easter Attack was the result of the entrenched phenomenon of the deep state that tries to manipulate religious extremists for their political ends. For him, the Easter Attack was more political than ideological. However, Gunaratna stressed the point that the Easter Attack directly resulted

¹ Imthiyaz Razak, "The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka's Muslims," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 55 (1), 2019, 3-16.

from the religious radicalization of a segment of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka, who embraced the Salafi-Wahhabism ideology of political Islam. The book elaborates this argument through a lengthy introduction and subsequent four chapters.

Gunaratna attempted to give a broader global and local context of the Easter Attack in the introduction. After encountering massive defeats in Iraq and Syria, IS (Islamic State) decided to decentralize “its ideological and operational capabilities”, creating provinces, groups, networks, cells, and personalities worldwide (p. lxxv). Gunaratna argues that the Easter Attack on Sri Lankan soil needs to be analyzed in light of this strategic change in IS’ operations. Concerning the local context, he argues that Sri Lankan IS-affiliated operatives’ attacks on high-rise hotels in Colombo and selected churches were “not just driven by domestic compulsions but also and perhaps mainly by international drivers” (p. lxxviii). He mentions two such events: an attack on a mosque by a right-wing terrorist in New Zealand on the 15th of March 2019 and the military campaign of a global coalition of military forces against IS in Iraq and Syria. Nevertheless, the book maintains that one of the chief reasons for the attack was negligence by the political leadership, which “was influenced by the ideals of Western liberal democracies,” in acting against the long-term phenomenon of religious radicalization despite multiple warnings from the intelligence community.

The first chapter, ‘The Anatomy of the Easter Attack,’ delves into the attack’s ideological motivations, initial preparations, and executions. Citing the mastermind of the Easter Attack, Zahran Hashim’s recorded speech, Gunaratna argues that a jihadi spirit drove the attackers to blow themselves up, and they “embraced the ISIS politico-religious ideology and believed that they were fighters of God” (p. 39). Then, he analyses the initial planning and execution of the suicide attacks following seven key aspects: operational security, chasing targets, supply chain, manufacturing explosives, rehearsal, and coordination (pp. 19-39). Moreover, many analysts are stunned why suicide bombers attacked the churches and hotels instead of Buddhist temples, given the existence of a few radical Buddhist monks and ultra-nationalist mobs who were behind the riots that targeted Muslim business centres and mosques in the last ten years.

In this chapter, Gunaratna tries to respond to that dilemma, stressing that “operational and ideological considerations would eventually prompt IS to strike Christians including Catholic targets over Buddhist and Hindu targets” (p. 23). On the nature of the attack, it seems that Gunaratna attributes the perpetrators of the Easter Attack to the Islamic State group on various ideological grounds and the recent change within IS in terms of its de-centralization strategy rather than direct order from the top leadership of the IS to its Sri Lankan self-claimed affiliates (pp. 50-51).

Following the general assumption that ideological exclusivism leads to extremism and terrorism, the second and third chapter tries to capture the ideological journey of the essential figures of Jihadism in Sri Lanka while exploring how they helped expand the country's IS network. Two of those foremost leaders are Zahran Hashim and Naufer. Gunaratna says that by embracing Salafi-Wahhabism Zahran was already known as a radical preacher, and he “wanted an immediate revolution, not a gradual evolution. He took radicalization to another level” (p. 79). The chapter highlights Naufer as the mentor of Zahran and the ideological father of the IS network in Sri Lanka. He further says that “the radicalization trajectories of Zahran and his mentor Naufer were almost identical as both were exposed to exclusivist ideology that took them to its logical conclusion, terrorism” (p. 99). Furthermore, the chapter provides a comprehensive picture of how both figures developed their network's capabilities to promote the Islamic State ideology, expand their support base, and conduct military training.

Chapter three introduces another central person, Jameel, who helped to create the terrorist group ‘Millat Ibrahim’ in Sri Lanka, which operated to promote IS ideology in the western part of the Island. Gunaratna highlights that both Zahran's group, which largely hailed from the eastern part of Sri Lanka, and Jameel's group operated independently without contact. However, Zahran and Jameel eventually met and decided to work on a single project for promoting IS ideology in Sri Lanka. The chapter also elucidates how these IS operatives infiltrated Islamic religious schools, Islamic movements, and digital communities to attract students and members to their ideology (pp. 115-130). In addition, Gunaratna did not forget

to shed light on the ultimate fracture that split the IS operatives into two different groups just prior to the Easter Attack, where most radical members of the two opted to follow the leadership of Zahran and Jameel while others stood with Naufer. Zahran's group decided to become suicide bombers for IS ideology. In contrast, the latter group was more strategic in their thinking in terms of establishing the ideology in Sri Lanka (p. 121). In the fourth and final chapter of the book, Gunaratna offers policy recommendations and solutions while keeping all the stakeholders in mind such as the international community, the government, law enforcement agencies, and community leaders, who are responsible for protecting communal harmony and national security.

As an overall note, it is evident that the strength of Gunaratna's work is in its attempt to provide an inside view into the dynamics that led to the Easter Attack. In particular, the book sheds light on all key personalities who propagated, planned, and executed the attack. Nevertheless, the book has a severe limitation regarding its approach to explaining the dynamics of Islamic socio-political groups and movements. The author follows the highly controversial binary framework of *peaceful and traditionalist Sufism vs. radical political Islam and Salafis* as an analytical category to study Islamic socio-political movements and groups in Sri Lanka in tracing the ideological root causes of Easter Attack. As a result, it seems that the author implicitly makes a controversial claim arguing that Islamic social movements and Salafi religious groups except the Sufis are complicit in the Easter Attack.

Furthermore, Gunaratna treats the Salafis, mainstream Islamic social movements like Jamaat-e-Islami and IS terror cells as like-minded groups where members of each can easily cross over to the other. This over-generalized perspective on Islamic religious groups tends to miss the theological and sociological dynamics/nuances that shape their discourses and activism in different contexts. Such binary reading fails to explain why most Salafi and Islamist groups rejected Jihadism as an ideology and strategy in the global and local contexts. Therefore, such a reading of the Islamic religious landscape, which Gunaratna adopted in this

book, has already been problematized in several works in recent scholarship².

It seems that the book's binary treatment of Islamic socio-religious movements mainly resulted from an absence of an in-depth theoretical chapter on the ideology of Jihadism. The book did not present an overview of Jihadism's fundamental assumptions,

² J. Wagemakers, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Ideology, History and Decedents* (Amsterdam University Press, 2022); I. Ahmed, *Islamism and Democracy in India: The Transformation of Jamath E Islami in India* (Princeton University Press, 2009); A. Bayat, ed., *Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2013). I. Hamdeh, *Salafism and Traditionalism: Scholarly Authority in Modern Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 2021); J. Wagemakers, *Salafism in Jordan: Political Islam in a Quietist Community*, (Cambridge University Press, 2016); K. P. Ewing & R. R. Corbett, *Modern Sufis and the State: The Politics of Islam in South Asia and Beyond*. (Columbia University Press, 2020); F. Muideini, *Sponsoring Sufism: How Governments Promote 'Mystical Islam' in their Domestic and Foreign Policies*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); N. Islam, & S. Islam, *Islam and Democracy in South Asia: The Case of Bangladesh* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Q. Wiktorowics, "Anatomy of Salafi Movements," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29 (2006), 207-239; H. Iqtidar, *Secularizing Islamists?: Jama'at-e-Islami and Jama'at-ud-Da'wa in Urban Pakistan* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

worldview, strategies, and evolution in modern Islam and how it differs from other schools of Islamic religious thought. Acknowledging this shortcoming as a significant analytical and theoretical weakness of the book is important. The book's generalized claims have the potential to refuel Islamophobia and inter-communal mistrust through its distortion of the internal dynamics and real image of the Islamic religious landscape viewed as a whole. These observations notwithstanding, Gunaratna's *Sri Lanka's Easter Sunday Massacre* is a welcome reference source for those interested in exploring the details about the extremist figures who engineered the Easter Attack in Sri Lanka and their plans and execution.

TRANSLITERATION TABLE

CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	
ء	'	'	'	ز	z	z	z	گ	—	g	g	
ب	b	b	b	ژ	—	—	ř	ل	l	l	l	
پ	p	p	p	ژ	—	zh	j	م	m	m	m	
ت	t	t	t	س	s	s	s	ن	n	n	n	
ث	—	—	ṭ	ش	sh	sh	ş	ه	h	h	h ¹	
ث	th	th	th	ص	ş	ş	ş	و	w	v/u	v	
ج	j	j	c	ض	ḏ	ż	ż	ی	y	y	y	
چ	—	ch	çh	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ة	-ah	—	-a ²	
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ال	al ³	—	—	
خ	kh	kh	kh	ع	'	'	'	¹ – when not final ² – at in construct state ³ – (article) al - or l-				
د	d	d	d	غ	gh	ğh	ğh					
ڈ	—	—	d	ف	f	f	f					
ذ	dh	dh	dh	ق	q	k	q					
ر	r	r	r	ك	k	k/g	k/ñ	k				

VOWELS

	Arabic and Persian	Urdu	Ottoman Turkish
Long	ا	ā	ā
	آ	Ā	—
	و	ū	ū
	ي	ī	ī
Doubled	ي	iiy (final form i)	iy (final form i)
	و	uww (final form ū)	uv
	و	uvv (for Persian)	uvv
Diphthongs	و	au or aw	au
	ی	ai or ay	ay
Short	ا	a	a
	ا	u	u
	ا	i	i
	ا	o	o or ö
	ا	i	i

URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. چ jh گ gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

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