



# COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The Fate of the Tamil Tigers

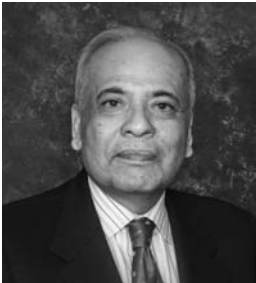
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Cover photo: Julia Drapkin/AP. Head of the Eastern faction of the Tamil Tiger rebels Vinayagamoorthi Muralitharan, also known as Karuna, right, stands with cadres at the Thoppigila Camp, the military camp of the rebels, in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, Thursday, March 4, 2004.

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# Executive Summary

Extremism in every form is a major concern for the global community. Though the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (also known as LTTE, or more commonly, as the Tamil Tigers) do not share the same religious motivations as the violent extremist groups that tend to garner the most interest today, they merit much greater attention from the international community. Their longevity, success, and tactics – their revival of suicide bombing in particular – render them a formidable foe. The protracted conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE offers several important lessons regarding effective strategies for combating violent extremism. These lessons hold – and indeed are all the more relevant – in the face of the recent military gains of government forces over the LTTE.

In recent years, the Sri Lankan government has pursued a predominantly military strategy against the well-armed Tamil Tigers. This policy has failed to eliminate the violence in the region and is unlikely to yield peace in the future, even in the face of current military successes by the government. The government's vow to end the civil war, even if achieved sooner rather than later, would only be a temporary victory – one that might diminish the level of violence in the short term but is unlikely to end it permanently. Sheer force, with no regard for the motivations and objectives of the LTTE, will not create the conditions necessary for an enduring and sustainable resolution of the conflict. The roots of this longstanding conflict are in the political and economic marginalization felt by the Tamil minority. A military victory by the government will not address this. Damaging military operations against the LTTE have not yet resulted in the LTTE seeking to change its tactics – the violent approach of the LTTE has wavered little. Without a negotiated settlement, the two sides will continue to pursue strategies that rely on violence, pushing aside the political goals and objectives that could actually, if resolved, bring elusive peace to Sri Lanka.

Continued violence will only serve to strengthen the resolve and sense of victimization of both factions. The longer the violence ensues, the more likely it is that the regional and global Tamil communities will be drawn into the conflict, potentially sparking an international campaign. India's close proximity to Sri Lanka, along with its 60 million strong Tamil community, puts the regional superpower in a precarious position. Should the extremism expand beyond Sri Lanka's borders, it will become a matter of global security and the international community will be

compelled to act. It would be far better for the international community to become involved now and offer whatever assistance it can to reach a conclusion in this long campaign, than to act when it has no choice and little leverage.

Given the prolonged military campaign against the LTTE, a growing death toll – especially among civilians – and the threat of a larger campaign spreading where there are large Tamil communities, the government of Sri Lanka would be advised to muster the political will to try to find a solution that addresses the political demands of the LTTE within the framework of a sovereign Sri Lankan state. This is not a call for capitulation but a call for negotiation and accommodation by both sides, even as government forces rack up military victories against the Tamil extremists. Insurgent organizations can and do evolve. LTTE participation in the political processes of Sri Lanka could shift the LTTE away from its strategy of violence.

## Key recommendations

For resolving the conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE

- Abandon the predominantly military strategy adopted by both sides following the end of the ceasefire agreement in January 2008 in favor of a strategy that favors political accommodation.
- Acknowledge the source of grievances on both sides as a starting point for negotiations.

For wider international efforts to counter violent extremism

- Major players – both global and regional – should work with the UN to appoint an internationally respected figure to mediate between the government and the LTTE.
- Commit to a cooperative strategy that forgoes a military approach and engages insurgent groups.
- Identify and acknowledge underlying political grievances as a starting point for negotiations.
- Address human rights violations in military operations against all insurgents.

# Introduction: Violent Extremism In Sri Lanka

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), also known as the Tamil Tigers, have waged a long – and some would say very successful – campaign of violence against the government of Sri Lanka. The civil war between the LTTE and Sri Lankan military has caused an estimated 70,000 deaths over the course of some twenty five years, including around 10,000 LTTE casualties. Although the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka is largely Hindu and the Sinhalese majority is predominantly Buddhist, the conflict is not religiously motivated. Rather, the impetus is self-determination as LTTE members are fighting for greater autonomy in what they consider to be their Eelam homeland.

This case study of the conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE offers a timely evaluation of the methods and strategies necessary for countering violent extremism. Following the January 2008 termination of the tenuous ceasefire between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, both sides reverted to an antagonistic military approach in seeking to resolve the conflict, the roots of which can be traced back to the British colonial era. And although the government appears closer than in previous efforts to a military defeat of the armed fighters of the LTTE, this conflict could continue in a modified form even after the cessation of wide-spread violence.

The end of British rule in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) in 1948 heightened tensions between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority. Previously the favored party under British colonial rule, Tamils quickly became both an ethnic and political minority group with the end of the colonial period. In response to this marginalization, the LTTE was founded in 1976. Under the charismatic leadership of Vellupilai Prabhakaran, the LTTE established itself as a separatist, liberationist group – one of many that emerged around this time. By 1983, the LTTE had begun armed action, embarking on a bloody campaign of violent extremism with the ultimate goal of creating a separate Tamil homeland. What had been relatively low-level violence between separatist groups and the government turned into a civil war after the events of July 1983, when some one thousand Tamils were killed (by Sri Lankan government estimates) in riots in the wake of an LTTE attack that killed over a dozen Sri Lankan soldiers.

The twenty-five year long ethnonational conflict has defied military solution. Despite the military preponderance of the Sri Lankan government over the LTTE guerrilla outfit (150,000 Sri Lankan soldiers versus an estimated 10,000 LTTE



fighters), the government has failed to eradicate the rebels. Instead, the LTTE have demonstrated a capability to export the war from their base around the Jaffna Peninsula in the far north to the Sinhala heartland in the south. Even the capital, Colombo, situated in the south, has not been immune to repeated LTTE attacks. Repeated military engagements have failed to change the status quo.

## The Tactical Strength of the LTTE

The LTTE has a devastating record of violence. It has been responsible for around 70,000 fatalities to date. In their twenty-five year battle against the ethnic majority in Sri Lanka, which the government argues is coming to a close, the LTTE have shown inventiveness, discipline, and extraordinary persistence. As pioneers of suicide bombing, the LTTE have used this technique to murder a host of senior government officials and civilians alike. LTTE members are responsible for the assassination of former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, Sri Lankan president Ransingh Premadasa, a Sri Lankan defense minister (Ranjan Wijeratne), a former national security minister (Lalith Athlathmudali), Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, Navy Chief Clancy Fernando, and a number of moderate Tamil politicians opposed to the radical LTTE cause.

While they have been waging primarily a guerilla war, the LTTE have not shied away from engaging government forces in frontal attacks, despite being radically outnumbered and outgunned by the Sri Lankan military. They have launched numerous successful attacks on military targets – most notably a 1996 attack on an army base near Colombo that destroyed a garrison of 1,200 soldiers. By any standards of insurgent action, this was a particularly damaging and destructive blow to government forces. Successful insurgent actions such as this not only sow fear and uncertainty among citizens, but also undermine the credibility of the government in protecting civilian life and property. But, even if the Sri Lankan Army continues to overrun their strongholds in the Jaffna peninsula, the LTTE could retreat into the Wannu jungles of north-central Sri Lanka to execute their irredentist struggle.<sup>1</sup>

The Tamil Tigers have shown how asymmetric warfare can work to a player's advantage through effective planning, ample resources, and a fanatical commitment to their cause.

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1 Manoj Joshi, "On the Razor's Edge. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 19, no. 1 (2006): 38.

## Devastating tactics

The LTTE is credited with inventing the suicide belt, pioneering the use of women in suicide attacks, and has assassinated two world leaders – the only terrorist organization to have been able to do so.<sup>2</sup> As pioneers of modern suicide bombing, the LTTE have been emulated around the world. Their tactics have been copied with equally tragic results by numerous extremist groups in the Middle East, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and, more recently, Iraq. The sheer number of suicide attacks undertaken by the LTTE is simply daunting – more than two hundred such attacks since the late 1980s. The staunch commitment of LTTE fighters and the indoctrination of its youth members in a “spirit of national fanaticism, spiritualism, sexual asceticism, and a cult of suicide”<sup>3</sup> make the LTTE a formidable opponent. The fervor of LTTE cadres is further illustrated by their use of cyanide pills to thwart attempts at capture, imprisonment, and possibly torture.

The aura surrounding the leader of the LTTE, Vellupilai Prabhakaran, has also served as a powerful source for LTTE recruitment and funding. Prabhakaran has developed an air of invincibility by eluding his would-be captors for decades. Remote and reclusive, Prabhakaran rarely appears in public, which only adds to his mystique. He has succeeded in creating a cult of personality, reflected in the LTTE pledge of allegiance to the Eelam struggle and to Prabhakaran himself.<sup>4</sup> Interviews with senior LTTE leaders exemplify the mythic perceptions of their leader; a senior LTTE administrator in Kilonochchi characterized Prabhakaran as “God becomes man.”<sup>5</sup> Prabhakaran’s appeal to disaffected Tamil youth both in Sri Lanka and in the extensive Tamil diaspora remains potent.

Like the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and other similar insurgent organizations, the LTTE has used the power of myth both to energize and mobilize its current cadres and also to recruit new adherents. They have rooted the Tamil birthright to Eelam lands in ancient Tamil rule in Sri Lanka. The LTTE also prey on the strong feelings of discrimination and oppression felt by many Tamils in post-independence Sri Lanka. This tactic has been tragically successful and “has persuaded thousands of Tamil Tigers in the last 20 years to resort to suicide and

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2 “Taming the Tamil Tigers from Here in the U.S.,” *Federal Bureau of Investigation*, January 10, 2008, [http://www.fbi.gov/page2/jan08/tamil\\_tigers011008.html](http://www.fbi.gov/page2/jan08/tamil_tigers011008.html).

3 Walter Lacquer, *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 193.

4 Brendan O’Duffy, “LTTE: Majoritarianism, Self-Determination, and Military-to-Political Transition in Sri Lanka,” in *Terror, Insurgency, and the State: Ending Protracted Conflicts*, eds. Marianne Heiberg, Brendan O’Leary, John Tirman (Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 265.

5 Sanappah Master, interview with O’Duffy, Kilonochchi, March 1, 2004, in *Terror, Insurgency, and the State*, 265.

seek martyrdom.”<sup>6</sup> The Tamil struggle against the Sinhalese majority government has been compared to that of groups such as the Hezbollah and the IRA, and the strength of their movement lies in the significance of the belief “that only revolutionary struggle can reassert group identity, restore inalienable rights and promote self determination.”<sup>7</sup> It is through the propagation of these myths that extremist groups are sustained; their power lies in the potency of their message.

When the potency of the message is not enough, the LTTE has taken to forcible recruitment of soldiers – including the recruitment of child soldiers. Both the LTTE and the Karuna Group<sup>8</sup> have been accused of using child soldiers despite agreements not to do so. The Sri Lankan government has been accused of – at best – looking away from the Karuna Group’s forcible recruitment of child soldiers to – at worst – being complicit in their abduction.

All sides have resorted to tactics that have violated the human rights of Sri Lankan civilians, leading to thousands of civilian deaths. The government’s apparent final push into the remaining territory controlled by the LTTE puts some 300,000 civilians, mostly Tamil, in harm’s way.

## Effective communicators

The LTTE are surprisingly sophisticated communicators. Through the use of sophisticated publicity channels such as radio, the Internet, and television, their propaganda reaches Tamils within and outside of Sri Lanka.<sup>9</sup> They rally support for the LTTE cause by broadcasting speeches by Prabhakaran and other leaders on occasions such as “Martyrs Day” and by depicting graphic images of atrocities committed by government forces against Tamil civilians. Utilizing the maxim that “the medium is the message,” their propaganda has a powerful resonance not only with the three million strong Tamil community in Sri Lanka, but with tens of millions of Tamils across the world. There should be concern by governments with large Tamil populations about the ability of the LTTE to radicalize segments of the Tamil diaspora, especially where those populations are vulnerable due to economic and/or social marginalization.

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6 David J. Whitaker, ed., *The Terrorism Reader*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 107.

7 Ibid.

8 The Karuna Group, named after Colonel Karuna Ammam (Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan), is an offshoot of the LTTE that now works in cooperation with the government against the LTTE.

9 David J. Whitaker, ed., *The Terrorism Reader*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 101.

The LTTE has also capitalized on the Sri Lankan government's human rights abuses against Sri Lanka's Tamils. While the Tigers themselves have a dismal human rights record, they have successfully used government abuses as an additional public relations tool to pressure the Sri Lankan government.

## A global support network

The LTTE receives significant support from the Tamil diaspora, numbering around 70 million. It operates its own intelligence service and has even established a foreign service that issues daily news bulletins and has representatives in thirty-eight countries.

Just as the IRA could call upon the support of the Irish diaspora for material and moral support, the LTTE can similarly bank upon the support of Tamil communities in Great Britain, Canada, the United States, Europe, and Australia. London has become the propaganda headquarters, feeding information – much of it more credible than Colombo's accounts – to Tamil organizations, embassies, and newspapers worldwide. Until relations with India deteriorated in 1991, the LTTE also utilized the proximity of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu as a sanctuary and logistical base. While the mainstream political parties in Tamil Nadu reportedly no longer support the LTTE, the latter still enjoys some measure of support among its fellow kin in the state.

Although the LTTE is banned in many countries, this has not unduly affected their fundraising, weapons procurement, or recruitment activities. The LTTE has procured the biggest international financial empire ever built by an extremist organization.<sup>10</sup> Its main sources of funding are expatriate Tamil communities in Canada, the United States, Australia, South Africa, and several European countries. Though some of the money comes in voluntarily, the LTTE also enlists enforcers to extract contributions from those who are reluctant to pay. As summarized in a Human Rights Watch assessment; “Although many Tamils willingly contribute money to the LTTE, many others do so because they feel they have little choice. The same fear that silences critics of the LTTE prompts many members of the diaspora to provide financial support for the LTTE, regardless of whether they support the LTTE's cause.”<sup>11</sup> Members of the Tamil diaspora are “asked” to make contributions in the thousands of dollars for individual families, in the tens of

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>11</sup> “Funding the Final War: LTTE Fundraising and Extortion within the Tamil Diaspora in Late 2005 and Early 2006,” *Human Rights Watch*, March 14, 2006, <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/11456/section/6>.

thousands for business owners, and one Hindu temple in Canada was allegedly asked to contribute Cdn\$1 million.<sup>12</sup>

Given the strength of support, resources, and resolve of the LTTE, it is unlikely that a military approach alone will entirely counter their threat, despite the recent military successes of the government forces. The notion of a ‘just struggle’ steeped in history and tradition is at the heart of extremism in every form and no amount of military power will overturn these convictions – in many cases it may even strengthen such sentiments. Extremists who have made the transition to violence may be overcome by military means, but their defeat will only be temporary. As long as the perceived political grievances exist, so too will the Tamil insurgency, whether in the form of the LTTE or through another guise. The only way to end the military struggle and truly counteract the conviction of the perpetrators of violent extremism is to address the ingrained underlying perceptions that fuel the conflict in a multi-pronged effort that addresses political motives, not military tactics.

## A History of Mistrust and Missed Opportunities

In retrospect, the Sinhalese-led government failed to pay sufficient attention to the hopes and aspirations of the Tamil minority in the period following independence in 1948. Many Sri Lankans looked upon the Tamils as collaborators with the British and resented what was seen as preferential treatment accorded to the Tamil. The Sinhalese-majority government undertook steps that relegated the Tamils to what has turned out to be a permanently subordinate position. A “Sinhala only” policy exercised by successive governments confirmed Tamil suspicions that the new constitution and Westminster winner-take-all electoral system would make their situation intolerable. The Tamils also faced the dramatic reversal of discrimination in university admissions and government employment after independence, which significantly worsened their economic conditions and future prospects.

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12 Ibid.

## Peace without participation – The Indo-Sri Lankan Accord

In the wake of failed discussions between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers in 1985, India undertook a bid for peace and launched the process that led to the 1987 Indo-Sri Lankan Accord. New Delhi recognized that Indian intervention in Sri Lanka could help avert an aggressive assertion of Tamil identity in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Geopolitical motivations were additional factors in that India sought greater influence in the region.

The signing of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord in 1987 represented the first major attempt to resolve the long-running conflict – and, importantly, the impetus came from outside of Sri Lanka. The talks leading to the Accord, however, did not include LTTE representatives. An Indian Peacekeeping Force [IPKF] arrived in Sri Lanka to separate the adversaries and encourage them to agree upon a permanent peace settlement predicated on a semi-autonomous Tamil region in the north and northeast. However, the Indian peacekeepers were soon engaged in military action against the LTTE and casualties were high on both sides: it left 12,000 – including around 1,000 Indian soldiers – dead and over 5,000 wounded. Indian troops were withdrawn in March of 1990 – less than three years after entering the fray in Sri Lanka. The inability of a major regional power with the fourth largest army in the world to defeat the LTTE militarily should have served as an indication to the Sri Lankan government that a purely military approach would be unlikely to succeed.

The main flaw of the accord was that, as the name suggests, it did not include the formal involvement of the LTTE or other Tamil groups (though some were consulted). The lack of LTTE consent or participation in the accord was the major source of criticism by the LTTE leader Prabhakaran. He accused both governments of attempting to “divide and rule” by recognizing and involving rival Tamil paramilitary groups and political parties but excluding the LTTE. In the end, the Sri Lankan government was reluctant to allow the north and east to achieve substantial autonomy.

## Another round of negotiations

A subsequent (1994/1995) attempt at a ceasefire failed because the discussions “could not be interpreted as a consensual and mutual recognition negotiating process.”<sup>13</sup> The government of Chandrika Kumaratunga, then-Sri Lankan president, “took a rigid stance on military positions in Jaffna, and insisted on the precedence of ceasefire monitoring over dialogue with the LTTE.”<sup>14</sup> A fundamental conceptual divide was also illustrated in a March 1995 statement by Kumaratunga in which she claimed that her government offered “a solution to the ethnic problem of Sri Lanka.”<sup>15</sup> The LTTE adamantly contested this description. If the conflict were ethnic in nature instead of ethno-national, as the LTTE claimed, then the government could assert the solution “merely” entailed extending full rights to the minority population, If, however, the conflict was ethno-national in nature, then the LTTE’s aspirations for autonomy and self-determination would have to be recognized.<sup>16</sup>

## The 2002 Ceasefire Agreement

After a series of failed initiatives, a ceasefire agreement (CFA) was finally signed between the parties in 2002. Six rounds of talks were held between LTTE and Sri Lankan negotiators from September 2002 to March 2003. Norway, with the consent of both parties, took the lead role in facilitating these talks.

The CFA established the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) in February 2002. The SLMM was an autonomous international body – with members drawn from Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland – created to monitor the agreement. During the first years of the CFA, there seemed to be a general spirit of cooperation between the parties and violations were relatively few.<sup>17</sup> However, the CFA was merely a holding operation. Even with the CFA in place, the two sides were still unable to discuss, much less agree upon, the substantive issues that had divided them for over twenty-five years. The lack of progress on critical issues did nothing to lessen the mistrust between the parties, resulting in setbacks in the peace process. Gradually the situation deteriorated, exacerbating insecurity and giving way to renewed military activity.

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<sup>13</sup> Heiberg, O’Leary, and Tirman, *Terror, Insurgency, and the State*, 263.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 263-4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission*, <http://www.slmm.info/>.

The ceasefire agreement was inherently flawed because it did not include any provisions for implementation. According to Ahilan Kadirgamar, spokesperson of the Sri Lanka Democracy Forum, the LTTE violated the CFA with impunity, which was in turn followed by reprisal violations by the security forces.<sup>18</sup> Both parties therefore, were guilty of violating the agreement (although the LTTE committed more violations than the government security forces). The acrimonious situation was further compounded by the victory in the 2005 presidential election of Mahinda Rajapaksa, an anti-LTTE hardliner.

By 2006, the situation had deteriorated significantly and continued to deteriorate over the next two years – so much so that the Sri Lankan defense minister did not feel restrained from calling the truce “moribund” and a “joke.”<sup>19</sup> Between early 2006 and late 2007, some 5,000 deaths were attributed to renewed military conflicts between the LTTE and the government. In January 2008, Rajapaksa, who headed a coalition of anti-LTTE Sinhala parties, ended the CFA.

Although the SLMM had performed its task credibly in extremely difficult conditions, it was clear to most observers that unless the two sides moved toward substantive negotiations, the status quo of a treacherous stalemate would continue.

## Fighting fire with fire

In an interview with the Council on Foreign Relations, Sri Lanka Democracy Forum spokesman Ahilan Kadirgamar painted a bleak picture of the country in 2008. He described how the situation in the country had deteriorated considerably in the weeks since the collapse of the six-year truce between the government and the LTTE: two members of parliament had been assassinated, clashes had resumed in the north, and there were a number of bomb blasts. Without even a tenuous ceasefire, Kadirgamar saw no obstacles to reigniting the war, saying “it will be an unrestrained war going forward.” He believed that the only way forward would be through a political process.<sup>20</sup>

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18 Ahilan Kadirgamar, interview with Bajoria, Jayshree, *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 11, 2008, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/15244/kadirgamar.html>.

19 “Sri Lanka truce end worries Norway,” *BBC News*, January 3, 2008 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/7169145.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7169145.stm).

20 Kadirgamar interview, *Council on Foreign Relations*.



And, as Kadirgamar predicted, with the withdrawal of the SLMM in January of 2008, there was indeed no obstacle to war. The government launched a renewed – and this time devastating – mission against the LTTE. Stoked by increased funding (which has led, according to the defense minister, to a 40 percent increase in the size of the armed forces) and improved training for the military, the government has scored impressive and previously elusive military gains against the LTTE. The rebel capital has been captured, key bases are in government hands, and numerous fighters (and civilians) have been killed.

After years of laying the groundwork for a renewed military campaign against the LTTE, Rajapaksa has said he will seek a political resolution to the ethnic conflict once the LTTE is destroyed. But Sinhalese nationalists could derail that plan, having already said that there would be no need to placate the Tamils with a power-sharing deal once they were defeated militarily.<sup>21</sup>

The Sri Lankan government's recent claims to have taken the last LTTE stronghold will likely mean an end of the large-scale civil war that has plagued the country for twenty-five years – but the war's conclusion would come without accommodation or concessions to the political grievances that motivated the conflict in the first place. The factors that gave rise to the conflict, then, remain. And the government's conduct if it pursues the LTTE into the civilian no-fire zone could lead to new grievances among the Tamil civilian population, who are bearing the brunt of the waning days of conflict between government and LTTE forces. This war cannot be won militarily, even if the Tamil Tigers themselves can be defeated. Past failures to eradicate permanently the LTTE challenges any optimism.

It is in the interest of the Sri Lankan citizens, state, and wider global stability to prove that there is a viable alternative to the violent extremism. After twenty-five years, neither the LTTE nor the Sri Lankan government can achieve a military victory. At this point, it should be apparent to both sides that a military approach alone cannot accomplish either of their goals, even as the government appears poised for a decisive military victory. The violence will not end. LTTE fighters who escape the government will likely go underground and continue the kind of hit-and-run attacks that characterized the early stages of the LTTE's campaign. The only possible way to establish long-lasting and viable security is with a mutually-agreed peace agreement that addresses the fundamental grievances of both parties.

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21 Ravi Nessman, "Sri Lanka Says Rebel Group on Brink of Defeat," *Associated Press*, January 10, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=6618794>.

## Political Accomodation: Making Room for the LTTE

LTTE leader Vellupilai Prabhakaran has gone on record stating “we are convinced that the Tamil national conflict can be resolved by peaceful means.”<sup>22</sup> The military option, although appearing more effective than at any time in the long-running conflict, cannot secure a lasting peace. Successful armed operations must be seen for what they are – a temporary respite to the violence – and the core grievances of the Tamils must be recognized.

The acceptance of the LTTE as the sole representative of the Sri Lankan Tamils would be an important precondition to a ceasefire. It must be recognized, however, that the LTTE does not represent the views and aspirations of all Tamils and has often been extremely harsh in its treatment of dissenters within the Tamil community. But previous talks have shown that attempts to divide the Tamils by overtures to anti-LTTE groups are counterproductive. The recognition of the LTTE as representatives of the Sri Lankan Tamil community will be the only way to compel the LTTE to recognize the rights of minority Sinhalese and Muslims in areas that they hope to govern in a federal settlement.<sup>23</sup> And if the LTTE, who are clearly the most radical in their views of the role of the Tamil minority, can be brought to the table, then the dispute can be resolved if the LTTE are assuaged. If the LTTE are given assurances of the government’s willingness to move from a unitary governmental structure to a federal arrangement (involving power-sharing at the central government and provincial government levels), a core Tamil grievance could be overcome, as the LTTE declared in 2002 that they were willing to discuss power sharing under a federal system.

Tamil participation in governance can only be guaranteed through changes in the Sri Lankan constitution. Any constitutional amendment requires the full support of both the major Sinhalese parties and a two-thirds majority of the Sri Lankan parliament. Sri Lanka’s constitutional amendment rule – adopted in a general constitutional change that did not gain Tamil support – currently acts effectively as a veto on any constructive and necessary institutional change that

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<sup>22</sup> Heiberg, O’Leary, and Tirman, *Terror, Insurgency, and the State*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> O’Duffy, “LTTE: Majoritarianism, Self-Determination, and Military-to-Political Transition in Sri Lanka,” in *Terror, Insurgency, and the State*, 282.

could ameliorate Tamil grievances.<sup>24</sup> Thus far, though, the Rajapaksa government has not yet shown any inclination to undertake political change while the military approach is being played out. The government is demanding disarmament as a precondition for political negotiations. It is, however, unrealistic to expect the LTTE to lay down its arms. In quick contrast, Indonesian leaders have shown great flexibility in agreeing to an autonomous arrangement that could end their conflict with Aceh militants.

## An international effort

As a facilitator in the 2002 CFA, Norway played a commendable role in the peacemaking effort. However, Norway eventually foundered because it could not persuade both sides to take the next essential step toward substantive negotiations. International cooperation and engagement may be able to generate a more robust conflict resolution architecture, involving stronger incentives for the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE.

Drawing upon the experiences of Northern Ireland and Western Sahara, the United States – in consultation with global and regional powers and the United Nations – could also consider appointing an internationally respected figure to act as a mediator between the government and the LTTE. Former U.S. Senator George Mitchell’s role as an intermediary between the British government, the Unionists in Northern Ireland, and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) eventually laid the groundwork for the Good Friday Agreement between the parties. Today, the “troubles” in Northern Ireland are largely resolved and the Unionists and Sinn Fein have finally agreed to share power.

A U.S. intermediary, appointed in consultation with the UN, would reenergize the peace process in that he or she may be able to persuade the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE rebels to move beyond the familiar stalemate.

Indian involvement is critical to the success of this initiative. India has traditionally opposed the involvement of global powers in its backyard. The Norwegian effort in Sri Lanka was tolerated by New Delhi only because the Norwegians kept the Indians fully briefed on their peacemaking mission. Given the much-improved relationship between the United States and India – which embraces elements of strategic cooperation – India’s reservations about a U.S. intermediary could be alleviated by some level of involvement or, at least, consultation on the negotiations.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.

There are additional ways for the international community to support the resolution of this long-standing conflict. The Sri Lankan economy, buffeted by civil war and the Asian tsunami of 2004, is sorely in need of foreign investment and assistance. A commitment from donor countries to increase substantially current levels of aid to Sri Lanka – currently running at \$1 billion annually – could inject much-needed funds into the areas most affected by the violence. This injection of funding could also serve to support the Sri Lankan government's development efforts.

## Conclusion: Taking the Violence out of Extremism

If left unaddressed, grievances in heterogeneous societies breed frustration and insecurity. These feelings may eventually intensify and become the harbinger of a violent insurgency. Violent extremism, therefore, can only be curtailed when governments develop greater sensitivity to the concerns of their citizens and redress them through timely legislative and administrative actions. The Tamils charge that their non-violent protests elicited no response from the majority Sinhalese ruling circles in Sri Lanka. Rightly or wrongly, they concluded that violent extremism was their only means of obtaining justice and equality.

All states have a right to protect their citizens from the attacks of violent extremists. The United Nations Security Council Committee on Counterterrorism has encouraged states to share information about the activities of violent extremists and to restrict their movements and flow of funds. However, extremist organizations will continually seek out new ways to circumvent these restrictions. A strategy of dialogue and counterterrorism measures (such as reducing funding and access to weapons) is the most effective way to curb the incidence of violent extremism. The inability, or unwillingness, of some governments to explore a negotiated non-military settlement to violent conflicts is an impediment to their permanent resolution.

History has taught us that the most powerful conventional armies can fail when faced with insurgencies or guerilla warfare. British efforts against the IRA and the Irgun in Palestine could be cited as examples, as could France's experience with the FLMN in Algiers, and the Israeli Army against Fatah and Hamas in the Palestinian territories or Hezbollah in Lebanon. Additionally, the U.S. military, the

world's premier fighting force, has experienced difficulties fighting against Iraqi insurgents and the Taliban in Afghanistan. This has also been borne out by the Sri Lankan army's experience battling the LTTE.

Insurgent movements can and do evolve over time. The LTTE was created as a secessionist movement. However, after two decades of armed combat, it has reduced its demand to "internal self-determination" in place of outright secession. Prabhakaran confirmed this repositioning of LTTE objectives in an address on November 27, 2007. He stated, inter alia, "we are prepared to consider favorably a political framework that offers substantial regional autonomy and self government in our homeland on the basis of our right to internal self determination. But if our peoples' right to self determination is denied and our demand for regional self rule is rejected we have no alternative other than to secede and form an independent state."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Vellupillai Prabhakaran, "Heroes Day Address" (November 27, 2007), [www.tamilnet.de](http://www.tamilnet.de).

## Policy Recommendations:

### *For the Sri Lankan government*

- Abandon the predominantly military strategy adopted following the end of the ceasefire agreement in January 2008.
- Recognize the underlying political grievances fuelling the LTTE campaign and engage with the LTTE as representatives for Sri Lankan Tamils.
- Acknowledge and act on the LTTE commitment to accept internal self-determination in place of independence.
- Address the widely-reported human rights violations that have resulted from the military campaign.

### *For the LTTE*

- Withdraw from military engagement with government troops and suspend all attacks on civilian targets.
- Reiterate conditions for a self-determination settlement including substantial concessions on disarmament.

### *For the international community*

- Offer electoral assistance to moderates in Sri Lanka to counter Sinhalese hardliners within the government.
- Appoint a mediator – in consultation with the UN – to facilitate talks between the Sri Lankan government and senior LTTE representatives.
- Include provisions for negotiations or dialogue with all parties to the conflict in any future ceasefire agreements.
- Engage the Indian government and Indian Tamil representatives in international mediation efforts.
- Consider economic incentives to enable a representative Sri Lankan government to pursue post-conflict development.

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