

Fighting the Insurgency and Waging the Peace: Mahinda Rajapaksa and the Tamil Insurgency  
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A little over five years ago, on May 24, 2009 the Washington Post published an OPEd by Mia Bloom which noted the demise of “the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), one of the most dangerous terrorist organizations on the planet. Since that time pundits of various stripes offered up a diverse set of arguments about the conflict that held Sri Lanka hostage for 25 years. Some have sought to focus on human rights decrying the tactics employed by the Sri Lankan Army to quell the insurgency. Others have questioned whether the Sri Lankan Army’s efforts to end the conflict could be described as a counterinsurgency.

As far as the human rights issue is concerned, the current crisis in Iraq/Syria is a somber reminder of how difficult it is to protect the innocent during counterinsurgency operations especially when insurgents rely on the local populace to provide a convenient shield for them. Moreover, the Tamil Tigers were willing to put the Tamil population at risk with the many minefields they laid and the improvised explosives (IEDs) they planted. It goes without saying that the Tamil Tiger insurgency’s IEDs “set the industry standard...[and] were far more deadly and effective than anything used by jihadi terrorist groups or suicide bombers in the Middle East and elsewhere.” The assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 was carried out by a Tamil Tiger employing a suicide bombing technique they pioneered. That same year the group forged its links to Islamic terrorism and in particular to al Qaeda. Two years later in 1993 the Tamil Tigers “provided an al Qaeda cell led by Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, who bombed the World Trade Centre in New York in 1993, with forged identification documents.” To be sure, throughout the 1990s reports received from Afghanistan attested to the presence of Tamil Tigers who provided military training to Asian and Arab nationals. Additionally, Tamil insurgents were a part of al Qaeda teams which trained terrorist groups in the Philippines while Tamil Tiger vessels were used to transport al Qaeda weapons. It is also important to remember that when the Sri Lankan Government invited the Tamil Tigers to participate in a conference, at which they were offered concessions, the result was a drastic upsurge in terrorist violence.

To extract this kind of cancer from Sri Lanka required a total commitment on the part of the government and significant tactical innovation by the Sri Lankan Army. Indeed, the overwhelming defeat of the insurgency came precisely because of all out counterinsurgency effort by the Sri Lankan Army, Navy and Air Force. It was an example for others to emulate and more recently the Economic Times of India published a story in which it states that “Pakistan must learn from Sri Lanka's success against the now vanquished LTTE to fight the Taliban insurgency in the country.” Still there are those who tend to remain fiercely pro Tamil Tiger, who, focus on purported human rights violations, and go so far as to say that the country is too heavily militarized, that this huge military presence is no longer needed.

Let us make no mistake about it, the Tamil Tiger conflict was an insurgency, and like so many similar acts of persistent terrorism imposed its will on those areas it conquered. It was not an ideological movement but one created by a petty criminal named Velupillai Prabhakaran who

originally hailed from Panadura. Beyond this, it is not the insurgencies that are the danger, but the corruption which feeds the insurgency. One needs to be keenly aware of the ties insurgents have with similar movements in other states and the monies they receive from foreign states. The German philosopher Karl Marx once stated that one need only “follow the money” to arrive at a better understanding of who is involved and why they support a particular movement. Are they insurgents of the heart or merely opportunists?

In the case of the Tamil Tigers they could never have carried on their insurgency without the aid of many in the diaspora. And herein lies the danger for Sri Lanka, something the Rajapaksa government has likely perceived, and this is that over time there will be some nostalgia generated for the former quasi-state administration run by the Tigers. While the political will of the diaspora to fight again may still exist, their options are limited precisely because of the decisive defeat of the LTTE and the resultant eradication of their infrastructure. The continued and strategically placed presence of the army ensures that it remains this way.