

remism

What the Tamil

By Mia Bloom

Their leader is gone, but their legacy remains intact

IT took a pitched two-hour gun battle with Sri Lankan special forces. Then a rocket launched into his armour-plated ambulance. But last Monday, death finally came to Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the Tamil Tigers separatist group.

Also gone are Prabhakaran's son and heir apparent, Charles Anthony, and as many as 300 cadres. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), one of the most dangerous terrorist organisations on the planet, has been essentially wiped out. But the Tigers' legacy remains intact. Their perfection of suicide bombings, their recruitment of women and children, their innovation in IEDs, have been emulated by other groups worldwide, from Al Qaeda to Hezbollah.

Though they considered themselves superior to jihadis, the Tigers opened the door to terrorism as a strategy of liberation and resistance to an

unwanted government or occupying force. And they reached a standard of deadly efficiency envied by US enemies and terrorists around the globe.

The Tigers, who claimed to represent Sri Lanka's Tamil minority, sought independence from Sri Lanka and its Sinhalese majority. Their popularity among Tamils resulted in part

bomber. With that one act, they alienated the Sri Lankan Tamil community from their Indian brethren and branded the LTTE as a terrorist organisation in 20 countries.

Over more than three decades, the LTTE perfected suicide terrorism by loading all sorts of vehicles with explosives: cars, boats and even bicycles.

Over more than three decades, the LTTE perfected suicide terrorism by loading all sorts of vehicles with explosives: cars, boats and even bicycles. They devoted a unit especially to suicide bombing

from the Sri Lankan government's ethnic cleansing campaigns and from their spectacular headline-grabbing terrorist attacks.

The key event for the Tigers - and for the suicide-bombing techniques they pioneered - was the assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 by a female suicide

They devoted a unit especially to suicide bombing, recruited cadres of child soldiers known as "baby tigers" and launched a women's unit commanded by women. They attacked the government by air and by sea and used operatives who defied terrorist profiling.

Among the victims of their most successful plots were a president and

Tigers taught Al Qaeda

several high-ranking members of the military. Attacking high-value targets often required months of meticulous planning. In one instance, a female bomber, Anoja Kugenthirarasah, apparently faked a pregnancy and attended prenatal maternity classes at a military hospital for three weeks before making a failed attempt on the life of the commander of the Sri Lankan army, Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka.

The organization trained the women in karate, hand-to-hand combat, in the use of automatic weapons and specifically for suicide bombing, including how to walk and sit as though they were pregnant. Explosives were usually placed around a woman's midsection to give the appearance of late-term pregnancy. The LTTE held the trained female operatives in reserve, to release whenever the organization wanted to show the government that it could penetrate the most difficult-to-reach targets all over the capital, Colombo.

The organization also enforced a strict code of conduct. Members were forbidden to drink alcohol, use drugs or engage in premarital sex. They were

issued glass cyanide vials to wear around their necks and instructed to bite down on the cylinders in the event of capture.

The members of the LTTE followed these strictures willingly and awarded Prabhakaran an almost cultlike devotion. The high point of the suicide bomber's life was not the completion of his or her mission but the meal they

shared with the glorious leader before the attack. After this honour, they were ready to die for him - and hundreds did.

The LTTE's improvised explosive devices set the industry standard, using a combination of military-grade explosive packed with ball bearings that performed like buckshot

shared with the glorious leader before the attack. After this honour, they were ready to die for him - and hundreds did.

The LTTE's improvised explosive devices (IEDs) set the industry standard. Using a combination of military-grade explosive packed with ball bearings that performed like buckshot, the belts were far more deadly and effective than any-

thing used by jihadi groups or suicide bombers in the Middle East and elsewhere. When Al Qaeda made inquiries in 2001 into whether the group would share its advanced technology and IED blueprints, it was told in no uncertain terms, as my sources said, "No, we don't want to kill Americans."

The leaders whom I interviewed in

December 2002, all dead now, looked down on Islamic suicide bombers. "We don't go after kids in Pizza Hut," one high-ranking Tiger leader told me in a clear reference to Hamas's 2001 Sbarro attack in Jerusalem, which killed 15 civilians (including six children) and wounded 130.

The Tigers also learned from their

mistakes. After the deadly 1996 Colombo Central Bank and World Trade Centre attack, which killed 91 civilians and injured more than 1,400, resulting in a backlash even among their staunchest supporters, they decided to choose their targets more wisely, focusing on the military, the police and the government. This is a significant difference from the deliberate targeting of civilians by Al Qaeda.

But tactical innovations in suicide attacks and scores of young men and women willing to die for Prabhakaran could not save the organization or its leader from the might of the Sri Lankan army. To counter the Tigers, the government implemented a policy of targeted assassination and did it with amazing accuracy. And though they did kill off the entire LTTE leadership in the end, Sri Lanka would do well to keep in mind that in other parts of the world, killing the leadership simply radicalizes the next generation and does not resolve the conflict.

This is not how terrorism ends, but it could be an intermission.

COURTESY THE WASHINGTON POST