Religious Extremism in Syria:
A New Launching Pad for Global Terrorism?

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Conference Report
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Institute for Near Eastern Studies, University of Vienna

Terrorism Research Initiative

Report Authors and Disclaimer:

This conference report was written by Nico Prucha of the University of Vienna and Robert Wesley of the Terrorism Research Initiative. The content of the report and views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the institutions or individuals represented at the conference.
Introduction

On 2 May 2014, the Institute for Near Eastern Studies of the University of Vienna and the Terrorism Research Initiative hosted the conference *Religious Extremism in Syria: A New Launching Pad for Global Terrorism?* This was the second conference from the Syrian Engagement Project. The first conference (conference report on our website), was focused on providing participants with perspectives from various Syrian civil society and political factions on the conflict and promoting dialogue between individuals and groups. This second conference was designed to deliver a smaller, more intimate environment for discussion of pertinent issues related to militant or extremist factions in Syria as well as discussions of wider regional and international implications. The conference offered a forum conducive for extensive speaker-audience interaction.

The conference brought together seven speakers from various institutions in Europe to provide insight on the on-going conflict in Syria. The one-day conference was intended to offer an introduction to various issues of particular importance for understanding extremist elements involved in the conflict. Alex P. Schmid, moderated the conference. In his introduction he elaborated on three key questions originally posed by Richard Barrett concerning foreign fighters: Why are they going there?; What are they doing there?; and What will they be doing when they come back.

The morning session of the conference began with an introduction to the conflict’s financing by Tom Keatinge with particular emphasis on private donors. Maura Conway then provided an overview of the online footprint of various Syrian actors and some research problems associated with such analysis. Joas Wagemakers addressed religious extremism in Syria from the Jordanian perspective, offering profiles of various Jordanian Salafi-Jihadis of relevance. Rüdiger Lohlker continued the discussion with an extension of issue he had addressed at the first conference in February, namely the use of Social Media with a case study of ‘propaganda memes’ being utilized by Syrian factions. The afternoon session began with an introduction by Nico Prucha on the Social Media activities of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). He focused on the relationship between these activities and the rationale employed by ISIS for furthering the sectarian conflict. Mahan Abedin provided a substantial introduction to the activities of the Syrian and also explained the role played by the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Robert Wesley delivered the final presentation on the interconnectivity of the Syrian and Egyptian conflicts, especially the emerging importance of new jihadist groups in Egypt.
Summary of Presentations and Speaker Bios

Below is a summary of presentations given at the conference and brief bios of the speakers. The conference was moderated by Alex P. Schmid, a Director of the Terrorism Research Initiative and a Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Netherlands.

Opening Remarks

“Religious Extremism in Syria: A New Launching Pad for Global Terrorism?”

In his opening remarks, Alex Schmid first focused on the magnitude of the tragedy unfolding in Syria: some 9.5 million people (42 percent of the population) have been uprooted, either internally displaced or as refugees (2.5 million) abroad. More than 146,000 people have been killed and some 600,000 wounded. 1.5 million homes have been destroyed and 60 percent of the hospitals are damaged or destroyed. Half of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance and half a million of them live in besieged areas, facing starvation. Next the speaker focused on the foreign fighters who hail from 74 different countries. While most of the 11,000 foreign fighters come from the Middle East and North Africa (esp. Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia), there are also an estimated 1,900 coming from 15 countries in Western Europe; with 80-100 coming from Austria. Another 900 foreign fighters come from more distant Western democracies, including Canada, the United States and Australia. Remarkably, the majority of them joined Islamist groups like ISIS and the al-Qa’ida linked Jabhat al-Nusra, rather than the more secular Free Syrian Army.
With the exception of Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, very few joined the fight on the side of the Alawites. While the regime and its foreign allies are united, and more likely to be on the winning side, the armed opposition is divided and weakening. Yet no end is in sight to this three-year-old civil war that has also become a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran on the one hand and between the United States and Russia on the other. The moderator also raised the question how many of the foreign fighter will return to their home country and continue the jihad there. He cited a figure offered by Thomas Hegghammer who held that, based on the Afghan and Bosnian precedents, one in nine of the jihadist veterans will be likely to continue the fight back home. This figure is on the high side when one looks at a wider sample of former international war veterans.

**Alex P. Schmid is one of the three directors of the Terrorism Research Initiative and Editor-in-Chief of its online journal Perspectives on Terrorism. He is also a Visiting Research Fellow of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague. Previous positions included a Chair in International Relations at the University of St. Andrews where Dr. Schmid was also director of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV). Before that he was Officer-in-Charge of the Terrorism Prevention Branch of UNODC. He is the editor and principal author of The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research (2011/2013).**

**“The Syrian Conflict and the Importance of Financing”**

In considering the ways in which insurgencies and violence perpetuate and in seeking to influence or curtail such struggles one often overlooked factor is finance. The availability of funding, the distribution of funding, and the sources of funding are critical issues to consider when seeking to address an on-going conflict such as the one we are witnessing in Syria. The nature of the funding of conflict has changed dramatically in recent years. In the case of the Syrian conflict, whilst funds from states such as Russia, Iran, the US, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey support various elements, a key factor to consider in addressing extremist groups is the funding provided by private donors, donors who are in most cases attracted by the concept of ‘jihadi finance’, donors who, for whatever reason are unable to travel to fight themselves but who seek the honour and heavenly reward of waging jihad by proxy.

In his presentation, Tom Keatinge reflected on the changing face of insurgent financing, considering the history of insurgent and extremist financing through recent conflicts, focusing in particular on the highly influential nature of private donor financing in the current conflict in Syria and how Europe and the international community can address a key factor in the continuation of this three year-old war. He also stressed that if the financing were to become a mainly internal matter as the combatants switch to a war economy, efforts to influence the conflict by curtailing foreign funding would be less successful.

**Tom Keatinge is a former investment banker at J.P. Morgan and an analyst of terrorist and extremist financing. He holds an MA in Intelligence & International Security from King’s College London.**
“Assessing the Role of Social Media in the Syria Conflict”

Making an accurate assessment of the role of online social media in conflict is fraught with difficulty. Online social media is nevertheless being widely portrayed by policymakers and in mass media as a crucial component of the Syria conflict, particularly in a European context with respect to the ‘recruitment’ of so-called ‘foreign fighters.’ Maura Conway’s presentation opened by describing and analysing the framing of the social media components of the Syria conflict by policymakers, both within European Union member states and at the EU-level, and in Europe’s English-language press. The second part provided an overview of social media activity surrounding the Syria conflict across a wide range of online platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, by a diffuse array of actors, including pro-regime, anti-regime, and a diversity of other contributors. The presentation concluded with a discussion of the difficulty from a social science perspective of evidencing social media’s impacts on/in the conflict, with particular attention paid to the problems surrounding research into the role of social media in the recruitment of foreign fighters.

Dr. Maura Conway’s principal research interests are in the area of terrorism and the Internet, including academic and media discourses on cyberterrorism, the functioning and effectiveness of violent political extremist online content, and violent online radicalisation. She has presented on these issues before the United Nations in New York, the Commission of the European Union in Brussels, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in London, and elsewhere. Her articles have, inter alia, appeared in, Current History, First Monday, Media, War & Conflict, and Parliamentary Affairs. Maura is Senior Lecturer in International Security in the School of Law and Government at Dublin City University (DCU) in Dublin, Ireland and Principal Investigator on VOX-Pol, a major EU-funded project on violent online political extremism.

“Jordanian Salafis and the Syrian Conflict”

The presentation of Joas Wagemakers addressed the Syrian conflict among (Jihadi-) Salafis in Jordan. Unlike earlier regional conflicts, like the ones in Afghanistan and Iraq, this conflict is relatively uncontroversial among Jordanian (Jihadi-) Salafis for both local Jordanian reasons as well as reasons that are specific to the Salafi community in Jordan in its quietist and jihadi variants. Although old fissures in the Jihadi-Salafi community in Jordan have recently opened again over which of the militant Islamist groups to support in Syria, the fight against President Bashar al-Assad has mostly united Jordanian Salafis in a way that previous conflicts have not. The presentation argued that this probably accounts for the relatively large number of Jordanians fighting in Syria.

Joas Wagemakers is an Assistant Professor and post-doctoral Research Fellow of Islamic Studies at Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. His research has focused on Salafism and Islamism, particularly their ideological underpinnings, with a geographical focus on Jordan, the Palestinian territories, Saudi Arabia and international discourse. He has published widely in international peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes, most recently in the Middle East Journal (2014, vol. 68, no. 1). His publications also include "A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi" (Cambridge University Press, 2012). He also blogs at Jihadica.com, a weblog on international developments in jihad, and co-edits ZemZem, a Dutch-language journal on the Middle East, North Africa and Islam.
“True Romance: A New Paradigm for Jihadis in Syria and Beyond?”

Approaching the problem of jihadi online propaganda requires a thorough examination of content and context to develop assessments of impact and evolution. Rüdiger Lohlker’s presentation introduced an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of online propaganda, using two examples of ‘propaganda memes’. These memes currently utilized by jihadis in the Syrian conflict are: the female fighter and the jihadi as a humanitarian. Both examples can be viewed as symptoms of jihadi efforts to reframe the practical aspects of jihadi concepts and activities on the ground in Syria. The presentation provided a novel perspective on propaganda analysis.

Rüdiger Lohlker is Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Vienna, Austria. He has conducted research on jihadi online activities for about 15 years. Currently he is focusing on analysing the visual impact of jihadi propaganda in social media. Other fields of research include Salafism and Arab Hackers. He has written frequently on these issues and is editor of the series Studying Jihadism at Vienna University Press, and Jihadism and Terrorism Logos.

“The Sectarian Divide in Syria as the Rationale of The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria to Indoctrinate, Radicalize and Recruit Foreign Fighters”

By studying Arabic and non-Arabic agitprop material on the conflict in Syria, Nico Prucha argued that localised policy recommendations could be developed on how governments deal with the issue of prevention and coping with returnees from Syria. A framework of interdisciplinary agencies, ranging from social workers to intelligence and academics, as is the case in The Netherlands or Sweden, may develop best practices to be emulated by other governments.

Nico Prucha focused in his presentation on the professional use of the new media by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to reach out with highly appealing audio-visual incitement material to Muslims worldwide. With an increase of foreign fighters among the ranks of ISIS from the European Union and the United States, the accounts of these televised foreign fighters were analysed and contextualized within the broader data-set of ISIS propaganda. The rationale of these foreign fighters is perhaps most appealing to Islamic communities in their respective countries of origin, as grievances and the framing of ‘injustices’ varies while the ideology is tied into Arabic ideology and religious reasoning.

Nico Prucha of the University of Vienna focuses on jihadi online activities related to Syria and the organized opposition. He is a Fellow at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH), University of Hamburg. His research centres on textual and audio-visual content analysis of al-Qa’ida activity online, specifically focusing on jihadist Shari’a law interpretation of hostage taking and executions. He has written frequently on the subject and blogs for Jihadica.com
“The Role of IRGC Qods Corps as Force Multiplier in the Syrian War”

In his presentation, Mahan Abedin discussed the IRGC Qods Force as the most technically capable protagonist in the international proxy war that is unfolding in Syria. The Force is also arguably the most ideologically committed in so far as it represents the cutting edge of the IRGC, Iran’s ideological parallel army. Whilst the Force’s deployment in Syria is relatively small (in the mid hundreds according to the best estimates), nonetheless it has been instrumental in turning the tide of the war by placing Syrian rebels at a technical, and to a lesser extent, ideological disadvantage.

The Qods Force acts as a force multiplier in the Syrian conflict in three crucial ways. First, the Iranians have helped set up and train the National Defence Force which has been more effective than the Syrian army in not only fighting the rebels but crucially in holding and protecting liberated territory. Second, the Qods Force has been instrumental in facilitating the entry of Lebanese Hezbollah into the theatre at a strategic level by creating a command and control structure that integrates Hezbollah with both the NDF and the Syrian army. Third, the Iranians are engaging in direct combat against some of the most professional and committed elements in the Syrian rebel movement in and around Aleppo with a view to preparing the ground for a major Syrian offensive on rebel strongholds in the north.

Mahan Abedin is the Director of Research at the London-based Centre for the Study of Terrorism. Previously, he was the Editor of Islamism Digest and the Jamestown Foundation’s Terrorism Monitor. He is also the Managing Director of Dysart Consulting, a public relations and research organisation. Widely recognised as an expert analyst of Iranian politics, he is a regular contributor to Persian-language media.

“Why Egypt Matters in the Context of the Current Syrian Civil War”

In his presentation, Robert Wesley discussed the on-going conflict in Syria and its relationship to political and security developments in Egypt. The presentation served to highlight the regional and international implications of the current conflicts and their interconnectivity. Special emphasis was placed on militant actors in each country and included a discussion of ideology, targeting and of governmental responses. The presentation provided an introduction to two Egyptian groups of particular importance to future terrorism activities – Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and Ajnad Misr. Also discussed were the potential implications for Syria and the region of the efforts by Egypt and other states to label as terrorist entities and pursue legal recourse against ‘moderate’ Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

Robert Wesley is the President of the Terrorism Research Initiative, a non-profit research institution focused on advancing human security through collaborative research. He is also a Principal of Cognitive Architectures, a security consultancy. He previously severed as an official of the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency.
Conclusion

Speakers were in general agreement that Syria would most likely turn into a similar, if not worse, launching pad for global terrorism than previous conflicts such as Afghanistan. The speakers also highlighted the rise of confessional warfare and the importance of the recruitment of foreign fighters from the greater Middle East, Europe and beyond to the deepening of divisions within Syria. Several speakers touched on the importance of the professional use of Social Media to attract recruits to the conflict and to raise funds.

During the panel session, participants exchanged views on the prospects for the cessation of violence, or an end to the conflict. There was some agreement as to the likely continued protraction of the conflict and the difficulties inherent in the task of reconciliation. Questions were raised as to how to de-entrench factions from their goals of ‘victory or death’, with one participant stating that the task is to get the majority of factions to either “agree not to win, or all agree to lose” and that external actors will have a critical role in forcing this agreement (e.g. through cutting off financing).

Some conference speakers also emphasized conflict’s implications for regional and international security, with Jordan, Egypt and Iran as case studies. These speakers pointed out the interconnectivity of events throughout the Middle East and the need to view the conflict in Syria in the wider context.

The authors of this conference report believe that there is a clear need to develop more policy prescriptive approaches for Western countries in particular, as there is an obvious lack of policy coherence; a fact that fails to invoke confidence for Syrian factions inside and outside of the country. This lack of confidence serves to exacerbate insecurities and promote the strengthening of extremist positions – factors that handicap efforts at reconciliation and political engagement.

In order to continue to enhance engagement mechanisms and further top-down and bottom-up peace building, the Institute of Near Eastern Studies of the University of Vienna and the Terrorism Research Initiative will continue, contingent on funding, to provide support and platforms for dialogue for stakeholders in the Syrian conflict. There is already a high level of interest from various Syrian factions in continuing with the conference series and other related events to promote understanding and reconciliation. These events are designed to gather stakeholders for honest exchanges. It is our sincere hope that we will be able to maintain momentum within the communities of interest and to nurture the seeds of reconciliation that have been planted.
About the Syrian Engagement Project

The Syrian Engagement Project is a joint project of the Terrorism Research Initiative and the Institute of Near Eastern Studies of the University of Vienna. It was initiated in 2013 in response to limited organized efforts to develop Track II dialogue among stakeholders in the current conflict in Syria. The Project seeks to take advantage of Vienna's historical disposition as a neutral environment for engaging in dialogue on international issues of contention. In this regard, it aims to foster the exchange of disparate perspectives on and to explore novel approaches to reconciliation and peace building in Syria.

The Project has initiated a conference series that has brought together various stakeholders and concerned groups in Austria and abroad for initial discussions and the identification of future work streams. An early outcome of this process has been the proposal to turn the experience of the Syrian Engagement project into an adaptable model for factional engagement in other expatriate communities, thereby exercising reconciliation in advance of any future political peace agreements.

Supporting the Syrian Engagement Project

The Syrian Engagement Project is currently looking to expand participation in this process and invites institutions interested in sponsoring or participating in the Project to contact the organizers. In particular, the Project is currently searching for institutions interested in co-hosting or co-sponsoring additional conferences in 2014. An additional two conferences are foreseen in 2014, contingent on funding. Potential sponsors of Track II efforts and policy-focused events are especially encouraged to contact the Syrian Engagement Project.

Points of Contact:

Nico Prucha
Fellow
Institute of Near Eastern Studies, University of Vienna
nico.prucha@univie.ac.at

Robert Wesley
President
Terrorism Research Initiative
wesleyr@terrorismanalysts.com