

# THE THREAT OF TERRORIST GROUPS IN THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN

Cairo, 5 November 2015, Al-Ahram Foundation

report  
from the Dialogue Workshop



REPORT No. **10**  
November 2015  
[www.euromesco.net](http://www.euromesco.net)

# THE THREAT OF TERRORIST GROUPS IN THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN

Cairo, 5 November 2015, Al-Ahram Foundation

## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Dialogue Workshop was a full day meeting where the authors of the Joint Policy Study on “The Threat of Terrorist Groups in the Euro-Mediterranean” had a chance to present their initial findings to the other participants including other researchers from the EuroMeSCo network as well as key experts and practitioners from several Arab and European countries. The authors had shared a short concept note with the other participants ahead of the meeting.

The Joint Policy Study analyzes and monitors the threat of terrorist groups with a focus on Syria (Daesh, Al-Nusra Front, and Al Qaeda), and the issue of foreign fighters’ recruitment. The workshop was structured along the sub-topics of the joint policy study. In the absence of one of the four authors, three of the four subtopics were discussed: the reasons contributing to the terrorist groups’ appeal among Arab and European Citizens, the terrorist groups’ recruitment tactics and the role of international and regional actors vis-a-vis terrorist groups.



Finally, the fourth session discussed preliminary recommendations by the participants, each in their topic of research, in the light of the research initial findings and feedback from discussions.

## 2. DETAILS OF THE FOUR SESSIONS

### 2.1 The Reasons Behind Terrorist Groups' Appeal Among Arab and European Citizens

Patrycja Sasnal from Polish Institute of International Affairs presented a series of reasons that could help explain the appeal of terrorist groups (especially DAESH) among the citizens of the Euro-Mediterranean region. She identified mainly four reasons.

#### *Political and Ideological reasons*

The author presented concepts such as faith as “ultimate concern” or the “plasticity of Islam” that were useful to understand how some terrorist groups could abuse Islam in order to attract Arab and European citizens. This was adding to the anti-system discourse used by Daesh that had some similarities with other anti-establishment discourses used by more respectable groups and by anti-liberal movements. Jihadist groups in general stood against the traditional Westphalian understanding of the state, considering it western-centric and Western-serving.

In general, Daesh had flourished in places where the State authority had been weakened and/or when the State had been very repressive towards some groups. These were important elements to understand the development of terrorist groups in Al-Anbar region (Iraq) or in Al-Raqqa (Syria).

The appeal of terrorist groups among Arab and European citizens could also be analysed as a symptom of a broader crisis of values and ideologies. Related to this is the identity crisis that characterized some European citizens from the third generation of Arab immigrants. This population was particularly vulnerable to the presentation of a distorted version of Islam and to distorted

nostalgic discourses highlighting the bright Arab past and the longing for this victorious heritage that also had some appeal among some Arab citizens. Last, discourses of terrorist groups were also claiming moral superiority.

A series of mistakes in foreign policy by Western powers had also created a fertile ground for the development of terrorist groups. The US invasion of Iraq for instance had destroyed a certain balance in the region and had led to increasing the power of Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

#### *Sociological and Psychological reasons*

The author also presented a series of social and psychological elements that could play as push factors. In addition to the identity/personality crisis and frustration, the author mentioned the psychological concept of the “burden of freedom” according to which it was sometimes easier to follow the orders of a desired group or fraternity than to decide individually, especially among the youth.

While DAESH was attracting very different profiles, the feeling of social exclusion/rejection was certainly helping DAESH and other terrorist groups to recruit. The example of a lady who joined DAESH after the end of her relationship was given.

Sexual frustration, power temptation, appeal of the “new”, lack of prospects, family difficulties and generational gaps were also discussed.

#### *Economic situation*

In this case, the focus is mostly on populations in the Middle-East, where poverty hit several countries. 35% of the Syrian population lives under the poverty line. For some, joining terrorist groups appears as an alternative to poverty. In DAESH, a certain remuneration is allocated to the fighters and their families. On other hand, DAESH collects taxes, and gives back receipts, unlike Assad regime. The economic outlook for most non-oil Arab countries, especially for youth is not very promising.

### *Practical and technical reasons*

Technological factors should not be underestimated. Young people are skilled when it comes to dealing with social-media networks. Among the young people from more than 18 different countries that had joined DAESH, some were indeed very skilled, had produced high-quality movies, were trained in chatting over the internet, and sometimes better master some communication tools than governmental authorities.

### **Feedback and discussion**

- The term 'appeal' of Daesh that was used by the author in the title of her chapter was contested by some participants on the grounds that the limited number of foreign fighters joining DAESH could not justify the use of the word 'appeal'.
- The need to prioritize the reasons was discussed.
- The psychological reasons mentioned in the paper were appreciated, as many of the attendees believe that these reasons were of key importance and deserved close scrutiny in the study. Some terrorist groups used methods similar to “sects” or “cults” to gain appeal. The comparison with Nazi methods was also made. The idea was to break the individual and remove him/her from the immediate family environment.
- The millenarian and apocalyptic dimension of DAESH discourse was also pointed out.
- The idea that DAESH could deliver, unlike States, was also stressed.
- According to a participant, there was also an education vacuum in some countries and terrorist groups had used illiteracy to impose their message to some segments.
- The idea of fraternity family completed a void in the person's psychology. DAESH presented itself as the better alternative to govern and apply justice, luring with notions of power and strength.
- There was a debate on the extent to which religion had a role in the appeal of DAESH and other terrorist groups.
- A participant suggested that the nostalgic feeling of the Islamic Golden age as a psychological drive needed more analysis, as the extremists were

not driven by religion but Jihad and the Glory of it. This was most notable in their self-identification as Jihadists not as Muslims.

- The importance of the sexual frustration argument was nuanced by some participants.
- A participant stressed the lack of hope of the youth in Arab countries, the feeling of injustice and the political crisis in some Arab countries

## 2.2 The Terrorist Groups' Recruitment Tactics

Amal Mukhtar from Al-Ahram for Political and Strategic Studies focused her presentation on the mechanisms and the tactics used by the terrorist groups to attract and mobilize recruits from the Mediterranean region.

From the perspective of the terrorist groups, the first step in the recruitment process consists in projecting and presenting a certain image. DAESH for example, defines itself as the defender of a grand project "bringing back the Caliphate", i.e. reviving the Islamic state under the leadership of one leader. Jabaht Al-Nusra (Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria) presents itself as the alternative to the Syrian Regime of Bashar Al-Assad, with the objective of establishing the Islamic rule in Syria, and abolishing the oppression of the Syrian regime against Sunni Muslims. When presenting itself, Jabahat Al-Nusra presents itself as more tolerant to other religions than DAESH.

In terms of mobilization tactics, the author distinguished the communication channels and the content of the messages disseminated through these channels to mobilize individuals (youth in particular), bearing in mind differences in messages addressed to European vs Arab recruits.

Direct channels of recruitment include prisons, mosques, universities, etc. They are all fertile environments to transmit extremist ideas about Islam and convince individuals to act. Indirect (or virtual) channels are media and Cyber space, including social-media platforms like Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, Facebook and other Blogs. DAESH provides an advanced model of using

media and internet that had nothing to do with Al Qaeda tactics in the 90s. DAESH had built from the young recruits that constituted the majority of foreign fighters, bringing with them sometimes their high-technical skills. The production of audio-visual products such of “The Return of the Gold Dinar to DAESH” was illustrating advanced film production capacities. Similarly, the monthly issuing of “Dabiq” magazine in 7 languages was giving an idea of the important resources of DAESH. Youth recruits were also spreading their own stories about joining the terrorist groups through the internet, especially social media. Such narratives developed for instance in “The story of immigration- Qesas Nafir” (Nafir is a historical Arab word that relates to war) were acting as a model to motivate other young people to join the war in Syria. Last, the role of recruitment agents (including imams and activists) was discussed as well as the concept of “self-recruitment” (i.e the spontaneous radicalization by some individuals).

In terms of content, four key messages could be identified:

- The call to bringing back the Caliphate “Khilafah”, featuring this mode of governance as the only way to bring back the golden age to the region.
- Protecting the vulnerable, preserving and maintaining justice. These messages include compensating the damages caused by the Syrian Army, and pointing out the persecution of the Iraqi regime against the Sunni-Muslims. This kind of message sometimes also refers to the alleged oppression of Arabs by the West.
- Being committed to the obligation of Jihad and Hijra. That Al-Hijra (emigration to the Khilafah) is presented as an obligation when conditions in a country are not suitable to practice the religion freely without restrictions from the government.
- The financial gains, by providing job opportunities and a proper revenue.

The case of female recruitment (that will feature prominently in the final joint policy study) was also discussed. DAESH needed women to build the caliphate and was delivering a tailored message to possible female recruits. The “Khansa’a Brigade” was specialized in hosting women, integrating them and punishing them if they violated the DAESH law.

**Feedback and discussion**

- Internet is an important tool and recruitment tactic, but it is not the only or the most important. Direct recruitment and personal communication prove to be more salient and important.
- The recruitment process does not depend just on one channel but it is a complex process which can include several channels and different messages.
- Governments generally do not have the competence to counter the media-war of DAESH.
- According to a participant, the ideas presented adopts a narrow scope regarding the recruitment process, which focuses mainly on the present, whereas the process of radicalization and recruitment policies date back to terrorist groups in Afghanistan, to which DAESH is in many respects an heir. In addition, the majority of the jihadisits now are part of the returning fighters from Afghanistan. Some former Talibans or Al Qaeda had joined DAEH ranks.
- According to some participants, it was noteworthy that recruitment happened under the watchful eyes of governments during the first year of the protest against Al Asaad regime in Syria.
- Children recruitment was very important and should not be overlooked in the chapter.
- A participant coming from the Ministry of Interior of an EU Member State presented in details a series of measures adopted in order to counter radicalization processes.

**2.3 The Role of International and Regional Actors towards Terrorist Groups**

Fouad Ammor from Groupement d'Etudes et de Recherches sur la Méditerranée presented his initial findings and made some initial remarks on the methodology and the difficulty to tackle the role of international and regional actors towards terrorist groups. There are at least three types of main regional and external actors/approaches towards Daesh: 1/ Three main external actors (US, EU, Russia); 2/ the regional actors (Iran, Iraq); 3/ the GCC (Saudi Arabia and Qatar).

**The US war on terror:** Under the Bush era and following 9/11, the intervention approach has been privileged. The US set up a strategy: the “war on terror”. President Obama has changed the approach and aimed at limiting the intervention outside and the related costs. Arguably, fighting DAESH has not been a key priority in the US agenda. **Russia, unconditional support to regional allies:** Russia supports the Syrian Regime unconditionally, and is reasserting its authority in the Middle East. **EU external policy: facts vs rhetoric:** The real difference between Europeans and Americans is that the US has mainly chosen to fight its war on terror abroad, whereas the Europeans have focused to a large extent on the threat at home. The EU seems to be pleased with the second role in the region behind USA. The EU regional policy lacks clarity. There is no common position towards the crucial issues in the region among EU members.

The Stances of the regional actors do not differ a lot from that of the international actors. **Iran: The Quest for Repositioning:** since Syria is the only Iran’s allied Arab state, Iran is supporting the Assad government and criticizes the US for allowing its allies in the Gulf to fund radical Sunni groups in Syria. However, Iran is also fighting DAESH, which possibly bring together Western countries and Middle East nations in a common cause. **Turkey, A Window of Opportunity to Settle the Kurdish issue:** until the terrorist attack on the Turkish territory in July 2015, Turkey’s relationship with DAESH was ambivalent. It refused to allow the US Air Force to launch attacks on ISIS from the US base in Turkey. Turkey was preventing refugee Kurds in Turkey from returning to Syria to fight with ISIS as part of a covert deal. This allowed ISIS to take back some territory from Syrian Kurdish control, undermining the efforts of Kurds to establish and protect their autonomous region in Syria. **Israel, The Big Winner in the Short Term:** Israel is the winner in the near future, no clear public stance is articulated.

### Feedback and Discussion

The paper needs to include more details about some regional complex dynamics, such as:

- The Turkish role is more complicated than presented; alleged indirect ‘support’ to DAESH at some point and the change of relations when it could not control it and its relations with the Kurds.

- The Iranian role needs more elaboration.
- The absence of the Arab league and problems of reactions in the Arab world
- Role of some Gulf actors e.g in United Arab Emirates and Kuwait have supported some terrorist groups.
- The role of North African countries; including tackling the fact that Morocco and Tunisia are exporting the largest numbers of foreign fighters.
- The interests of the regional actors in the oil trafficking networks involving DAESH.
- Russian interests to protect the Port of “Tartus”; quantity of oil shipments protected by the 5th and the 6th American Fleet that passes from the Mediterranean to the red sea.
- The paper also did not focus on the main topic of the study, which is “foreign fighters’ recruitment”, so the paper needs to analyze the role of the international and regional actors toward the recruitment process and how they even support or counter this threat.

### **Preliminary Recommendations**

Among other recommendations, the following points were made by participants to the workshop:

- Countering the terrorist ideas through engaging in discussing Islamic values to address the extremist interpretations furthered by the terrorist groups.
- Reforming the religious institutions.
- Reviving values and culture of tolerance and coexistence.
- Reforming education.
- A comprehensive pragmatic approach which takes full consideration of the psychological approach is needed to deal with the root causes of radicalization along with the security, military, cultural, social and economic approaches, through tailored preventive measures.
- Direct security measures especially border security: Borders are used as gates of recruitment so there should be improved control over borders.



This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union or the European Institute of the Mediterranean