

# **Regional Report: Violent Extremism in the Middle East**

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11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, first taking the form of armed insurgencies struggling against imperialism and then evolving to challenge the repressive and dictatorial governments of the post-colonial era. Modern extremism in the Middle East has evolved as a response to a variety of grievances, namely Western intervention, Israeli occupation of Palestine, and repressive regimes throughout the region. However, with very few exceptions, similar radical organizations often deviate in their strategic objectives and their level of regional influence. Therefore, responses to terrorist groups require diverse and innovative responses that are specific to the group being challenged and address the root causes of

## **EXTREMISM IN THE MODERN ERA**

In the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the United States, terrorism and violent extremism has risen to the forefront of the political agenda and has emerged as the most substantial threat to global peace and security. Just as the children of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century fought the evils of fascism and the baby boomers were constantly disturbed by the prospect of nuclear war with the Soviet Union, the millennial generation is now engrossed in a protracted conflict with a number of powerful extremist groups. This security threat differs from those before it in a number of ways: first, it is decentralized and exists in many different areas throughout the world; second, it can be difficult to distinguish who is the enemy and where they are located; and third, it requires innovative responses that go beyond the application of military force.

The origins of these radical groups can be traced much further back than September



extremism in a specific region.

## **CONCEPTUALIZING EXTREMISM**

For the purposes of this report, “radical”, “extremist”, or “terrorist” will all be used to refer to groups or individuals with extreme ideologies. Extremism may refer to any group which:

- is a non-state actor
- utilizes the threat or use of violence against civilian targets to achieve their political objectives

- supports, advances, or advocates for an ideology considered harmful and intolerant to mainstream society

“Islamism” or “Salafism” will be used to refer specifically to extremist groups who are Islamic in nature and whose actions are based on their own radical interpretation of Islam. These groups operate with the strategic objectives of removing Western influence, deposing existing governments, and creating an Islamic fundamentalist regime which observes sharia law.

The causes of radicalization will be analyzed at the individual level, as well as the factors that contribute to the formation and successful maintenance of the various organizations with which extremists are affiliated.

## I Iraq and Syria

Given the complexity of the events in Iraq and Syria over the last fifteen years, it is difficult to adequately summarize the effects of extremism on the region. Extremism has been allowed to flourish in both Syria and Iraq due to the collapse of both states and the ensuing power vacuum that has emerged. A simplified explanation of the Syrian Civil War encompasses four coalitions: the Kurds in the north; Islamic State in the east; President Assad’s government forces and groups loyal to him; and the opposition, which includes the Free Syrian Army, an array of moderate and Salafi rebel groups, and Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria. There is a seemingly endless list of armed groups operating in the Syrian war and alliances are constantly shifting, however, most actors are

aligned with one of these four groups.

IS is easily the most influential extremist group operating in Iraq. The conflict in Iraq pits Islamic State against the Kurdish Peshmerga in the north and Iraqi security forces in other areas of the country. Iraq has been a hotbed for Islamist extremism since the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003, as the government struggles to restrain the militias that were given the opportunity to grow and evolve in the chaos that followed the American invasion.

### Islamic State

Islamic State burst onto the world scene in 2013 and have changed the character of the global jihadi movement with the official proclamation of a caliphate in June 2014. IS



evolved from al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and had their relationship severed with the al-Qaeda

network in 2013 due to their extreme brutality towards other opposing factions. Members loyal to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi aligned with IS and members loyal to Muhammad al-Julani elected to remain with al-Nusra.

Islamic State controlled or inhabited an area

of approximately 210,000 square kilometers as of December 2015.<sup>1</sup> However, they are currently experiencing losses due to coalition air strikes and offensives from Iraqi security forces. They surrendered the city of Fallujah in June 2016 but still maintain control of Mosul and Raqqa, both of which are strategically important.

### Jabhat al-Nusra

Jabhat al-Nusra, also known as Nusra Front, is al-Qaeda's official affiliate in Syria. They also evolved out of AQI and were officially formed in 2011. Under the leadership of Abu Muhammad al-Julani, al-Nusra rejected Islamic State's call for a merger in 2013 and reinforced their commitment to Ayman al-Zawahiri and the al-Qaeda franchise. Ideological and tactical differences have manifested in the wake of their split in 2013.

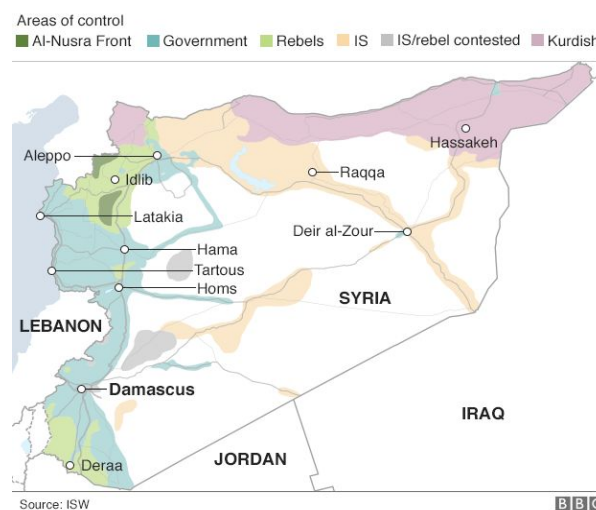
The Freeman Spogli Institute at Stanford University reports that over 3000 soldiers have been killed in conflict between IS and al-Nusra since March 2014.<sup>2</sup>

Al-Nusra initially employed terrorist-style attacks in the beginning of the civil war, which included suicide bombing and vehicle explosives targeting Assad's forces and civilians. They subsequently transitioned to more conventional military tactics beginning in 2012 and similar to IS, they have now been successful at seizing and governing large

swaths of territory.

Many experts contend that al-Nusra is a more substantial long-term threat than Islamic State. Like IS, they have managed to consolidate territorial control and operate as a state in the sense that they can provide security and social services to people on the ground. They are undoubtedly a radical, Salafist group but their more moderate stance has not alienated large sections of the population like the brutality of IS. According to the *Institute for the Study of War*, al-Nusra has "established an expansive network of partnerships with local opposition groups that have either grown dependent on or fiercely loyal to the organization".<sup>3</sup>

The international community's unitary focus on eliminating Islamic State may tip the balance of power in favor of al-Nusra if



regional and Western coalitions are not careful to eradicate IS and al-Nusra simultaneously. Nicolas Henin repeatedly stresses this in his

<sup>1</sup> "What is Islamic State?". *BBC News*, 2 December 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29052144> (June 28, 2016)

<sup>2</sup> "Mapping Militant Organizations- Jabhat al-Nusra". 2015. *Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies*, Stanford University.

<sup>3</sup> "Al Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Threats to the U.S. and Europe". *Institute for the Study of War*. <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/al-qaeda-and-isis-existential-threats-us-and-europe> (June 29, 2016).

analysis of the Iraq/Syria situation; Iraq and Syria have become two conflicts irreversibly intertwined – policy addressing one will have consequences for the other.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, anti-extremism measures must address IS and al-Nusra concurrently if they are to have any long-term success.

## Policy Options to Combat IS and al-Nusra

### Foreign Fighters

- Countries must take specific measures to address the root causes of radicalization. Depending on country context, this may emphasize socio-economic reforms, rehabilitation of returning fighters, education programs facilitated through community or religious forums, etc.

### Fighting Sensationalism

- The IS strategy seeks to portray the conflict as an apocalyptic battle between the West and the Islamic world. Allied countries must not play into this strategy through xenophobic policies, sensationalized media coverage, ineffective and unwarranted refugee restrictions, and military action which creates more support for extremist factions

### Political Solutions

- A solution which offers the prospect of inclusive government and personal security will immediately undermine support for IS and al-Nusra

*The day this (political) agreement is struck, Islamic State will lose half its members”.*

*-Ayman Abdel-Nour, editor-in-chief of All4Syria and former friend of Bashar al-Assad*

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<sup>4</sup> Henin, Nicolas. *Jihad Academy*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury (2015)

## 2 Turkey

The extremist threat in Turkey is twofold: first, the growing presence of Islamic State; and second, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party). The PKK is a political movement that was founded in 1979 by Abdullah Ocalan and has since engaged in armed conflict against the Turkish government. The PKK has consistently resorted to violence to further their objectives, vacillating between calls for an independent Kurdish state and increased Kurdish autonomy within Turkey.

Conflict between the Kurds and the Turkish government predates the formation of the PKK. A report by the Bipartisan Policy Center explains that Kurdish repression can be traced back to the beginning of the modern Turkish state in 1923. Furthermore, they contend that when violence has increased—as it did in the 1920s and 1980s—it has correlated with more oppressive and authoritarian governance.<sup>5</sup> With a resurgence in hostilities between the two parties, this demonstrates that President Erdogan’s autocratic leadership style is contributing to the radicalization of the Kurdish community.

At the same time as the Kurdish insurgency has rekindled, IS is increasingly carrying out attacks in Turkey as part of its efforts to destabilize the region. Bombings linked to IS have killed over 200 people in the past year

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<sup>5</sup> “Authoritarianism and Escalation: Preparing for the Worst in Turkey’s Resurgent Kurdish Conflict”. 2016. *Bipartisan Policy Center*.

alone.<sup>6</sup>

The unique complexity of Turkish counter-terrorism policy lies in the dual threat posed by the PKK and IS. As the Kurds remain a fundamental actor in the regional battle against IS, Turkey’s animosity toward the Kurdish national movement is harmful to coordinating an effective policy towards IS

Attack	Fatalities	Perpetrator
Istanbul- June 28, 2016	43	IS
Ankara-March 13, 2016	37	Kurdish militants
Ankara-Feb 17, 2016	28	Kurdish militants
Ankara- Oct 10, 2015	100+	IS
Suruc- July 20, 2015	32	IS

**5 Deadliest Terror Attacks in Turkey 2015-16**

with other regional actors. Analysts have accused Turkey of doing little to oppose the rise of IS in order to counteract the influence of the YPG (People’s Protection Units – the military wing of the Kurdish-affiliated PYD political party in Syria). The strategies of Erdogan—welcoming the destruction of Kobane in 2014, bombing PKK bases in northern Iraq, and attacking PYD positions in Syria<sup>7</sup>—do little to refute this accusation. While violence by the PKK against innocent civilians can never be justified, Erdogan’s creeping authoritarianism and Turkey’s hostile

<sup>6</sup> “Airport Attack in Istanbul is the Latest in a Year of Terror in Turkey”. *New York Times*, June 30, 2016. [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/28/world/middleeast/turkey-terror-attacks-bombings.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/28/world/middleeast/turkey-terror-attacks-bombings.html?_r=0) (July 5, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> “Authoritarianism and Escalation: Preparing for the Worst in Turkey’s Resurgent Kurdish Conflict”. 2016. *Bipartisan Policy Center*, pg. 21.



position towards the Kurds seems to be the most culpable factor in the rise of extremist activity and the most formidable challenge to eliminating IS and other radical elements within the Turkish state.

### 3 Israel/Palestine

Israel-Palestine constitutes one of the most intractable conflicts in the Middle East and in the world. 74.9% (6.3 million) of the population in Israel is Jewish and just 20.7% (1.75 million) are Arab. However, when accounting for the additional populations of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, there are 6.3 million Arabs – equaling the amount of Jews.<sup>8</sup>

The modern state of Israel was formed in 1948 after the rapid immigration of Jews to Palestine beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Palestinians living within Israeli territory have been continually treated as second-class citizens due to the evolution of the state’s distinct Jewish identity.

After the 1967 Israeli-Arab War, the West

<sup>8</sup> Baker, Luke. “Population parity in historic Palestine raises hard questions for Israel”. *Reuters*, 10 September 2015. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-demographics-idUSKCN0RA1VR20150910> (June 26, 2016).



Bank and Gaza Strip were annexed by Israel, hence beginning the occupation that has persisted to present day. According to the *Middle East Research and Information Project*, Israel has built 145 settlements in these occupied territories and permitted the migration of 560,000 Jewish citizens.<sup>9</sup> In direct defiance of international law, Israel has slowly extended Israel's borders and pushed Arabs off of Palestinian-owned land. Israeli encroachments into the West Bank and Gaza Strip have contributed to the emergence of a number of armed resistance groups

The main distinction between these groups is their willingness to participate in the political process. **Hamas** and **Fatah** have both committed to negotiations with Israel and have been represented in official Palestinian political institutions such as the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) and the PA (Palestinian Authority). **Palestinian Islamic Jihad** has rejected calls to negotiate or become involved in the political process. However, all groups have utilized violence and advocate for armed struggle against Israel to achieve their political objectives.

## **HAMAS**

Hamas (an acronym meaning 'Islamic Resistance Movement') is the governing authority in the Gaza Strip and the most notable of the Palestinian militant groups. Although they have amassed some legitimacy, they continue to be designated as a terrorist

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<sup>9</sup> "Primer on Palestine, Israel, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict". *Middle East Research and Information Project*. <http://www.merip.org/primer-palestine-israel-arab-israeli-conflict-new> (June 23, 2016).

organization due to their refusal to renounce the use of violence against the Israeli state.

Hamas first emerged in 1987 and their ranks have since grown substantially. Estimates on the numerical strength of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades—the military wing of Hamas—vary wildly, ranging anywhere from 10,000-40,000 soldiers.<sup>10</sup> In the 2006 Palestinian elections, Hamas defeated the previously dominant Fatah party by winning 77 of 122 seats<sup>11</sup>. This has led to a split within the Palestinian Authority ever since, with Hamas and Fatah splitting the governance of Gaza and the West Bank. Despite Hamas' role in governing the West Bank through their provision of security and essential social services, they are still classified as a non-state actor. Their use of violence to further their political agenda classifies them as a radical extremist group. The 2008 and 2012 wars between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip has bolstered support for Hamas from both Palestinians and the international community.

## **Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)**

Palestinian Islamic Jihad is an Islamist movement completely opposed to the existence of the Israeli state. They oppose any two-state solution to the conflict and use violence to further their goal of imposing an

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<sup>10</sup> Bender, Jeremy. "Hamas' armed wing numbers in the tens of thousands, and it's ready for a long conflict". *Business Insider*, 21 July 2014.

<http://www.businessinsider.com/hamas-armed-wing-in-tens-of-thousands-2014-7> (June 22, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> "Primer on Palestine, Israel, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict". *Middle East Research and Information Project*. <http://www.merip.org/primer-palestine-israel-arab-israeli-conflict-new> (June 23, 2016).



Islamic regime in all of historic Palestine.

The PIJ's founders split away from the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1970s to focus specifically on Palestine. They have relied heavily on suicide bombings targeting both civilian and military targets, although the number of attacks inside Israel has declined since security increased around Gaza.<sup>12</sup>

The PIJ differs significantly from Hamas and Fatah. They are far smaller, with less than 1000 members and "limited popular support".<sup>13</sup> They do not provide services for the population and most importantly, they reject constructive cooperation within governmental institutions and are unwilling to pursue a peaceful solution to the crisis. In this sense, they are one of the most extreme Palestinian groups and their hostile position undermines the ability of other Palestinian groups to negotiate peacefully with the Israeli government.

### **Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Fatah**

The PFLP and Fatah have historically formed the two largest groups represented in the Palestinian Authority. Both have seen their influence diminish in recent years with the rise of Hamas. PFLP is a movement combining Palestinian nationalism with Marxist-Leninist ideology. Along with smaller far-left groups, the PFLP has consistently carried out attacks against Israel since 1967, utilizing plane

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<sup>12</sup> "Palestinian Islamic Jihad". *Council on Foreign Relations*. <http://www.cfr.org/israel/palestinian-islamic-jihad/p15984> (June 27, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

hi-jacking and explosives.

Similar to PFLP, Fatah is a secular group that has historically advocated for armed struggle to liberate Palestine from Israel. However, Fatah has struggled to maintain their influence after the death of their iconic leader, Yasser Arafat, in 2004. With Hamas' success in the 2006 elections, Fatah's influence is confined predominantly to the West Bank under the leadership of Mahmoud Abbas at the helm of the Palestinian Authority.

### **Lone Wolf Extremism**

Violence between Israel and organized Palestinian groups has been accompanied by isolated attacks carried out by individual citizens. A *Los Angeles Times* article reports that 200 Palestinians and 30 Israelis have been killed by lone-wolf attacks since September 2015, including stabbings, shootings, and car ramming.<sup>14</sup> The most recent act occurred on 30 June 2016 in which a 19-year-old Palestinian man snuck into an Israeli settlement in the West Bank and stabbed a teenage girl to death in her bed.<sup>15</sup>

These individuals are not linked to the state or organized militant groups but threaten to push the security situation towards another Intifada ("uprising"). Palestinian attackers see themselves as martyrs; they justify the killings

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<sup>14</sup> Mitnick, Joshua. "What's Behind the Sharp Decline in Lone-Wolf Stabbing Attacks in the West Bank?". *Los Angeles Times*, 11 May 2016.

<http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-israel-lone-wolf-20160511-story.html> (June 27, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> "Israeli Girl Stabbed to Death by Palestinian Inside Bedroom". *BBC News*, 30 June 2016.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36671991> (June 30, 2016).



as revenge for Israeli encroachment into Palestinian areas. The Palestinians killed in these attacks are either the perpetrators who are immediately gunned down by Israeli security forces, or innocent victims who are subsequently murdered by Israelis blindly seeking retribution for the murders of their own citizens. This has created a seemingly endless cycle of violence and heinous crimes committed by the civilians of both sides.

### **Jewish Extremism**

A much smaller but often overlooked component of extremism in Israel-Palestine is the existence of radicalized Jewish networks carrying out attacks on Palestinian communities. One such group is referred to as the “Revolt”, a band of radicalized high school dropouts who are angry with terrorist attacks being carried out against the Israeli state. According to the *New York Times*, they “seek the collapse of the state of Israel, with its democratic government and courts, and the creation of a Jewish kingdom to replace it based on religious law, with all non-Jews expelled”.<sup>16</sup> They are trying to accomplish this primarily by creating unrest through attacks in the West Bank on Palestinian and Israeli targets. Generally, they do not pose a significant threat to the stability of Israel but it is worth noting that Jewish extremism in opposition to the state continues to exist. Israel has responded to these terrorist networks by using the same extreme measures

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<sup>16</sup> Kershner, Isabel. “Israel Faces New Brand of Terrorism, This Time From Young Settlers”. *New York Times*, 11 January 2016. [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/12/world/middleast/revolt-network-foments-new-brand-of-jewish-terror-in-israel.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/12/world/middleast/revolt-network-foments-new-brand-of-jewish-terror-in-israel.html?_r=0) (June 23, 2016).

that were put in place to suppress Palestinians suspected of terrorist activity. This includes imprisonment without charge and denying the right to meet with a lawyer.<sup>17</sup>

### **Why is extremism prominent in Israel and Palestine?**

Extremism of any nature in Israel and Palestine is the product of an “all-or-nothing approach”<sup>18</sup> being employed by various actors. It is almost unanimous in the international community that the resolution of the conflict will require a two-state solution, however this is less likely to happen as each side employs tactics that undermine the likelihood of such an agreement.

Continuing expansion of Israeli settlements into the West Bank is an example of such an impediment. As Israel continues to encroach on Palestinian territory, the more likely the Palestinians are to resort to violence instead of peaceful methods of conflict resolution. As the main Palestinian militant organizations invoke an armed struggle, citizens are more likely to be radicalized and join in the violence, both Palestinians and Israelis alike. Thus, the root causes of extremism in the region is Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip that has fostered the radicalization of the population and created an endless cycle of violence committed by both sides. As Benotman and Swan note in their

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Benotman, Noman and Ed Swan. 2013 “Israel-Palestine: The Peace Process and Global Extremist Discourse”. *Quilliam Foundation*. <https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/israel-palestine-the-peace-process-and-global-extremist-discourse.pdf> (June 30, 2016).

Quillam Foundation report, the Israel-Palestine conflict has been entrenched in the global jihadi rhetoric, becoming a symbol for the Muslim world's fight against Western oppression.<sup>19</sup> This will make it increasingly difficult for the two actors to make meaningful concessions that are necessary for a long-lasting and peaceful solution.

## 4 Lebanon

Lebanon is a small country of 6 million people and a diverse balance of religious groups which includes Muslims (54%), Christians (40%), Druze (5.6%), and various other sects constituting the remainder.<sup>20</sup> Sunnis and Shias are equally represented, each making up 27% of the Lebanese population.<sup>21</sup> Like many areas of the Middle East, the delicate religious balance is a constant threat to stability, as radical groups use various shocks to fuel extremist rhetoric. Lebanon has long been used as a base for Palestinian operations and is a stronghold for the Iranian-sponsored Islamist Shia party, **Hezbollah**. This has resulted in outbreaks of violence in 1976, 1982, 1996, and 2006. Beirut has been the target of multiple suicide bombings in recent years and it seems increasingly likely that the conflict in Iraq and

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "Lebanon- People and Society". *CIA- The World Factbook*. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/le.html> (June 27, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Syria will spill over into Lebanon.

### Hezbollah

It is difficult to fully understand Lebanese politics without a knowledge of Hezbollah. Meaning "*Party of God*", Hezbollah was

created in the early 1980s with support from Iran. They have carried out a number of high-profile attacks on American targets, including the kidnapping of U.S. officials, the 1983 killing of 240 U.S. Marines in their barracks, and at least one attack on the embassy in Beirut.<sup>22</sup> This has earned them a spot on the U.S. State Department's list of designated terrorist organizations. Nevertheless, Hezbollah is the epitome of a group who blurs the line between a terrorist group and a legitimate actor. Similar to Hamas, they behave as a state insofar as they participate in the political process, provide essential security, and act as a



<sup>22</sup> Norton, Augustus Richard. 2000. "Hizballah of Lebanon: Extremist Ideals vs. Mundane Politics". *Council on Foreign Relations*. <http://www.cfr.org/religion/hizballah-lebanon-extremist-ideals-vs-mundane-politics-paper-muslim-politics-project/p8612> (June 28, 2016).



provider of social services. They have solidified their support base in Lebanon, especially among the Shi'ite population, after forcing Israel's withdrawal in 2000 and being granted a veto in the cabinet after the 2008 Doha Agreement.<sup>23</sup> They currently hold 12 seats in the Lebanese parliament but their March 8<sup>th</sup> coalition holds 57 (out of 128). Their veto and separate military wing also affords them a significant amount of influence.

Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war is the one of the main contributors to the current extremist threat in Lebanon. Their intervention on behalf of the Assad regime has called into question their identity as a Lebanese nationalist party or an Iranian proxy dedicated to furthering the interests of the Shia population. Support for Assad has alienated the Sunni constituents in Lebanon, making them feel increasingly marginalized and weary of growing Hezbollah influence.

In yellow are the districts won by Hezbollah's March 8<sup>th</sup> coalition in the last parliamentary elections.<sup>24</sup>

### **Sunni extremism**

Lebanon has experienced a Salafist revival in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and unfolding of the Syrian crisis. Fighting has taken place between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Sunni extremist groups in

the northern city of Tripoli, accompanied by the introduction of Islamist factions linked to IS and al-Nusra carrying out deadly attacks in Beirut and the Beqqa Valley. Radicalization is being imported from neighboring conflicts but is also an inherently home-grown issue which will require domestic solutions.

The Lebanese Sunni population is at risk of being radicalized for many of the same reasons that have contributed to radicalization in other areas of the Middle East – there is a growing sense of marginalization which threatens to upset a delicate and unstable political balance. To some extent, terror attacks are the result of spillover from the violence in Syria and a symptom of dealing with large numbers of refugees, many of whom are Sunni Muslims fleeing the Assad regime. However, the causes are deeper than regional instability. The considerable power and influence wielded by Hezbollah, a party with a distinctly Shia identity, has caused resentment among Sunni groups in Lebanon. A report by the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* states that a number of assassinations targeting Sunni leaders have weakened the opposition to Hezbollah and pro-Assad factions.<sup>25</sup> In addition, Sunni-dominated areas of the country, such as Tripoli, have become increasingly disadvantaged socio-economically. Resentment towards Hezbollah has been reinforced by their intervention in the Syrian

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<sup>23</sup> Masters, Jonathan, and Zachary Laub. "Hezbollah". *Council on Foreign Relations*. <http://www.cfr.org/lebanon/hezbollah-k-hizbollah-hizbullah/p9155> (June 29, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Harnisch, Chris. "2009 Lebanese Parliamentary Elections". *AEI Critical Threats Project*. <http://www.criticalthreats.org/lebanon/2009-lebanese-parliamentary-elections> (June 28, 2016).

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<sup>25</sup> Lefevre, Raphael. 2014. "Tackling Sunni Radicalization in Lebanon". *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/12/23/tackling-sunni-radicalization-in-lebanon-pub-57592> (June 30, 2016).

civil war in support of Assad's forces. These trends contribute to sectarian tension and threaten to turn Lebanon into the next Syria or Iraq. Instability is being used opportunistically by radicalized units to conduct violence, using their perceived exploitation as justification for atrocities.

### How to Combat Extremism in Lebanon

As Hezbollah's involvement in Syria is currently the primary contributor to domestic radicalization, the simplest solution would be Hezbollah's withdrawal of support for the Assad regime. Lebanon will also need to strengthen political institutions and provide more support to disaffected segments of the population if they are to prevent further processes of radicalization. As this will be hard to accomplish in the foreseeable future, the *Carnegie Endowment* report outlines a number of steps that may help to prevent radicalization in Lebanon in the short-term:<sup>26</sup>

- **Strengthen Dar al-Fatwa**- reform within bodies of religious authority will help to strengthen legitimacy and appoint competent clerics who will preach against extremism, violence and intolerance
- **LAF** must become more inclusive, accountable and transparent, in order to win the support of the people
- **Reform the refugee system** so that it does not contribute to radicalization- tighten border security but also reduce mistrust with refugees already in Lebanese territory
- International community must

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

provide **humanitarian support** in order to give Lebanon the capacity to stop the spread of radicalization

## 5 Jordan

As one of the few countries in the Middle East blessed with relative stability, confronting extremism in Jordan consists of mitigating the home-grown radicalization problem and securing its borders against the conflicts occurring in neighboring countries. Jordan is a predominantly Sunni Muslim country, allied with the U.S. and one of only two Arab countries to have made peace with Israel.<sup>27</sup> The kingdom's location and pro-Western orientation makes it a target for Salafist extremism.

According to a 2015 report by the Soufan Group, over 2000 Jordanians have travelled to fight for extremist groups in Iraq and Syria – the fifth-most of any country in the world.<sup>28</sup> Experts have estimated that there are 10,000 Salafi jihadists in Jordan itself.<sup>29</sup> State security agencies have toughened anti-terror laws in response and continue to crack down on

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<sup>27</sup> "Jordan country profile". *BBC News*, 30 May 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14631981> (June 30, 2016).

<sup>28</sup> "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq. 2015. *The Soufan Group*, p. 5.

[http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf) (Accessed June 8, 2016).

<sup>29</sup> Laub, Karin. "Jordan Widens IS Crackdown; Signs of Home-Grown Extremism". *Washington Post*, 29 June 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/jordan-widens-is-crackdown-signs-of-home-grow-n-extremism/2016/06/29/ad999b76-3dc2-11e6-9e16-4cf01a41decb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/jordan-widens-is-crackdown-signs-of-home-grow-n-extremism/2016/06/29/ad999b76-3dc2-11e6-9e16-4cf01a41decb_story.html) (July 5, 2016).

those suspected to have links with IS. Vigilant surveillance of social media has led to strict punishments for anyone plotting or even sympathizing with IS. This security-centric approach has resulted in approximately 300 sentences being given to young Jordanians at risk of radicalization, which may have negative

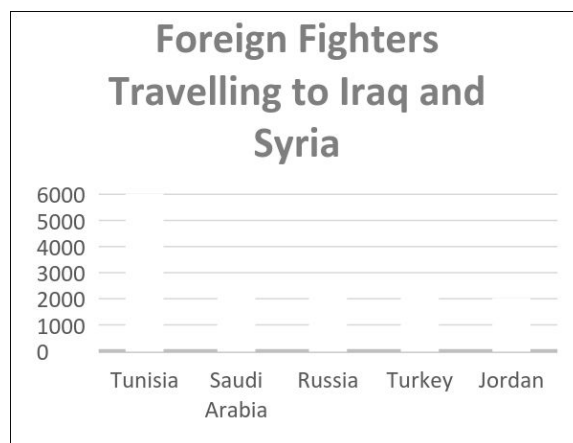
implications for extremism prevention.

A strictly punitive approach to de-radicalization in Jordan is problematic for two reasons: it ignores the underlying causes contributing to radicalized attitudes and it leads to the formation of jihadi networks within prisons. David Schenker, of the *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, has found that many jihadists in Jordan come from affluent backgrounds, thus the problem of extremism in Jordan is not strictly related to socio-economic issues or lack of border security; it lies in the appeal of radical Islamist ideologies.<sup>30</sup>

Prisons can also act as jihadist recruiting camps for young individuals already at risk of being radicalized. Abu Musab al-Zarqaqi, the

<sup>30</sup> Schenker, David. "Terrorist Spillover in Jordan". *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/terrorist-spillover-in-jordan> (June 27, 2016).

founder of what would eventually become Islamic State, is one of many jihadists who created and refined terrorist networks inside of the Jordanian prison system. While security is important to preventing the instability of Syria and Iraq being imported into Jordan, it must be combined with more innovative



measures. A study done by Mercy Corps offers a number of alternative strategies:<sup>31</sup>

- **Focus prevention programs on social networks, not demographics**  
Provide community-based alternatives
- **Support, educate and partner with local actors**  
Utilize sources of authority, such as imams and tribal leaders. Educate on the realities of fighting. For example, Sunnis killing other Sunnis is a key reason why jihadists desert IS after arriving in Iraq and Syria
- **Political and financial support to address the root causes of extremism**

## 6 Persian Gulf

This section will include analysis on extremism that is relevant to the six countries that are members of the Gulf Cooperation

<sup>31</sup> "From Jordan to Jihad: The Lure of Syria's Violent Extremist Groups". *Mercy Corps*. [https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/From%20Jordan%20to%20Jihad\\_0.pdf](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/From%20Jordan%20to%20Jihad_0.pdf) (June 12, 2016).

Council—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates—as well as the Republic of Yemen, who is not a member. The Islamic Republic of Iran will also be discussed as a key regional actor.

Due to the fertile breeding grounds for radicalization in Iraq and the Levant, non-state terrorist groups are most often associated with regions further to the north. The strong authoritarian governments of the Gulf states have been relatively successful at preventing jihadist groups from operating within their borders and gaining any de facto power in the region. However, it would be grossly incorrect to suggest that radical Islamism is absent from the Arabian Peninsula. As of December 2015, 2500 radicalized Saudis have travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight for militant groups such as IS and al-Nusra, the second-most of any country.<sup>32</sup> The Houthi insurgency in Yemen has evolved into a full-scale civil war, destabilizing the country and providing the opportunity for AQAP and Islamic State to launch operations in a strategically important area of the Middle East. IS has also threatened to engage Saudi Arabia, disputing its position as the true representative of Islam and declaring that it must be destroyed along with the West and other non-believers, in the pursuit of a “real” caliphate.

The rise of these extremist ideologies is a

<sup>32</sup> “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq”. *The Soufan Group*, December 2015. [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf) (Accessed June 16, 2016), p. 5.

direct threat to the stability of the Persian Gulf and is inextricably linked to historical legacies and the contemporary policies of these countries. Opposing radical militant groups are supported by both Saudi Arabia and Iran as part of the wider Sunni-Shia struggle for regional influence in the Middle East. This is a contributor to the success of extremist groups in the Middle East, as they serve as proxies for the opposing interests of the two regional powers.

Country	GDP per capita (USD)
<b>Qatar</b>	\$93,990
<b>Kuwait</b>	\$43,005
<b>UAE</b>	\$42,934
<b>Bahrain</b>	\$26,686
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	\$24,499
<b>Oman</b>	\$20,924

With the exception of Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula is known for its vast oil reserves which have contributed to the prosperity of the GCC states. According to IMF data, Qatar, Kuwait, and the U.A.E are three of the richest countries in the world, each with a GDP per capita exceeding \$40,000 US.<sup>33</sup> The wealth of the Gulf states is a significant factor and is strongly related to the support of insurgency groups in the region.

<sup>33</sup> “Gross domestic product per capita, current prices-2014”. *International Monetary Fund*. <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2016/01/weodata/weorept.aspx?pr.x=54&pr.y=10&sy=2014&ey=2021&scsm=1&ssd=1&sort=country&ds=.&br=1&c=512%2C419%2C449%2C564%2C453%2C429%2C456%2C433%2C439%2C463%2C443%2C744%2C446%2C466%2C474&s=NGDPDPC&grp=0&a=> (June 16, 2016).





### Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

AQAP is one of the most active and capable Islamist insurgencies in the region. They were officially established in 2009 after the merging of the Saudi Arabian and Yemeni branches of al-Qaeda but have existed under a number of different aliases since the return of the mujahadeen in the late 1980s after fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. They subscribe to a radical interpretation of Sunni Islam and advocate against secularism and foreign influence. They have claimed responsibility for a number of high-profile attacks, including the detonation of explosives on a U.S. naval ship in 2000 which killed 17 crew members.<sup>34</sup> There is also speculation that they were involved in the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris that killed 12 people.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> “USS Cole Bombing Fast Facts”. *CNN Library*, 6 April 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/18/world/meast/uss-cole-bombing-fast-facts/> (June 20, 2016).

<sup>35</sup> Schmitt, Eric, Mark Mazzetti, and Rukmini

Operating in the southeast of the country, AQAP has experienced a revival in recent years owing to the power vacuum created by the conflict between the government and Houthi rebels. As of 2014, it was estimated that the group had approximately 1000 members.<sup>36</sup>

According to the Global



Terrorism Index, AQAP was responsible for over 60% of terrorist attacks in Yemen in the year 2014, killing over 400 people.<sup>37</sup> Opposed to both the government and the Houthi insurgency, they rely on suicide bombings targeting mainly the police and military but have also carried out attacks on civilians.

The U.S. has been conducting covert military operations in Yemen since 2002. Over this time, they have launched 148 air strikes, killing an estimated 744 AQAP members and 105 civilians, according to *The Long War Journal*.<sup>38</sup>

Callimachi. “Disputed Claims Over Qaeda Role in Paris Attacks”. *The New York Times*. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/15/world/europe/al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula-charlie-hebdo.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/15/world/europe/al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula-charlie-hebdo.html?_r=0) (June 21, 2016).

<sup>36</sup> “Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula- AQAP”. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 19 June 2015. <http://www.cfr.org/yemen/al-qaeda-arabian-peninsula-aqap/p9369> (June 20, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> “Global Terrorism Index”. 2015. *Institute for Economics and Peace*. <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf> (Accessed June 6, 2016), p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Roggio, Bill and Bob Barry. “Charting the data for U.S. airstrikes in Yemen, 2002-2016”. *The Long War*



The U.S. strategy of air power to eliminate high-level AQAP commanders is similar to their strategy towards Salafist militant groups in other areas. Resulting civilian casualties and the absence of other viable options is responsible for fostering local support for extremist groups and this is problematic for the utility of air strikes in achieving strategic objectives.

AQAP has been one of the few beneficiaries of the civil war in Yemen. Borrowing strategies from al-Nusra in Syria, they have gained support from local populations by establishing a governing capacity and portraying themselves as a protector of Sunnis who are threatened by the Houthi's overthrow of the central government.

### **Houthi Insurgency**

The Houthis are an insurgency group which is Islamic in nature and is made up of followers from a Shia sect that is referred to as *Zaydi*. Residing in the northern regions of Yemen, they have been active against the Sunni-dominated government since 2004 and killed over 320 people in terrorist attacks from 2009 to 2015.<sup>39</sup> The conflict erupted into civil war after the Houthis invaded the capital, Sanaa, in early 2015 and deposed President Hadi and his government.

Saudi Arabia has framed the Houthis as a proxy group funded by Iran to project their

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*Journal*. <http://www.longwarjournal.org/yemen-strikes> (June 20, 2016).

<sup>39</sup> "Global Terrorism Index". 2015. *Institute for Economics and Peace*.

<http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf> (June 6, 2016), p. 26.

Shia influence. As a result, they have led a coalition to intervene on the side of President Hadi's forces. UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Jordan have contributed to the Saudi-led coalition through air strikes. Many analysts believe that Saudi-led intervention to suppress the Houthi revolt is indirectly contributing to the rise of IS and AQAP by allowing them to consolidate control in other areas of the country. The coalition also provides weapons and support to various anti-Houthi groups, many of whom are Salafist radicals with ties to al-Qaeda themselves.<sup>40</sup> Thomas Juneau argues against the narrative of a proxy war pitting the influence of Saudi Arabia versus Iran, stating that the Houthis receive only modest support from Tehran and were not specifically created or directed to further Iranian interests.<sup>41</sup> The dynamic between Iran and the Houthis is more an alignment of interests than a shared ideology. Iran projects its regional influence through other organizations such as The Revolutionary Guard- Quds Force, the Badr Corps and Hezbollah and these are far more impactful in other areas of the Middle East.

### **Islamic State in Yemen**

Islamic State has established a branch in Yemen in the past year and a half in an effort to capitalize on the political conflicts that are de-stabilizing the country. They are employing the same strategy as AQAP in the sense that

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<sup>40</sup> Arrabyee, Nasser. "Rising Extremism in Yemen". *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=62832> (June 20, 2016).

<sup>41</sup> Juneau, Thomas. "Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: a limited return on a modest investment". *International Affairs*: 92 (2016). DOI: 10.1111/1468-2346.12599 (June 21, 2016).

they are rallying Sunni support by portraying the Houthi insurgency as an Iranian attempt to further Shia influence in the Middle East. Also like AQAP, they have enjoyed little resistance in Yemen from the Saudi-led coalition, who are pre-occupied with defeating the Houthis.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the instability of the political environment, others report that IS is struggling to project its influence in Yemen and its power remains subordinate to al-Qaeda. Where AQAP has succeeded, IS is subject to their downfall. They currently have less members than AQAP—numbering only in the hundreds—and their brutality and failure to integrate themselves within the population is incompatible with Yemen and damaging to their support base.<sup>43</sup>

### **What causes extremism in the Persian Gulf?**

The ideal conditions for the success of extremist groups is political turmoil, as evidenced by the recent encroachments of AQAP and IS in Yemen during the civil war. However, it is important to note that these groups exist long before conflict breaks out. Instability creates the opportunity for these groups to consolidate their power but what

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<sup>42</sup> Almosawa, Shuaib, Kareem Fahim, and Eric Schmitt. “Islamic State Gains Strength in Yemen, Challenges Al Qaeda”. *The New York Times*, 14 December 2015. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/15/world/middleast/islamic-state-gains-strength-in-yemen-rivaling-al-qaeda.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/15/world/middleast/islamic-state-gains-strength-in-yemen-rivaling-al-qaeda.html?_r=0) (June 20, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> Fitch, Asa and Saleh al-Batati. “ISIS Fails to Gain Much Traction in Yemen”. *Wall Street Journal*, March 28, 2016. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/isis-fails-to-gain-much-traction-in-yemen-1459203675> (20 June, 2016).

factors cause them to form in the first place? What grievances do these individuals have and how can they be prevented? Although the answers are never simple, they may help to eradicate terrorist groups by attacking them at their foundation – the ability to consistently recruit members into their ranks.

Tracing al-Qaeda back to its roots, it formed and evolved in response to foreign influence in the Middle East, first the Soviets in Afghanistan and later the Americans in the First and Second Gulf Wars. As Daniel Byman of Brookings Institution explains, the “occupation of Iraq helped rescue al-Qaeda...proving to skeptics that the United States was indeed bent on controlling the Islamic world”.<sup>44</sup> These actions motivated young individuals to join al-Qaeda and fight against what they perceived to be invaders, not liberators.

Extremist groups also form in the absence of democratic institutions, when specific segments of the population are repressed by the government, have their rights violated, and lose faith in the political process. Seemingly left with no other option, groups resort to violence. This is the dynamic that has led to the rise of the Houthi insurgency in Yemen over the past ten years, accelerating after the assassination of their leader, Hussein al-Houthi. One of the most important principles of the Zaydi faith is that the people are allowed to oppose an unjust ruler.<sup>45</sup> The

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<sup>44</sup> Byman, Daniel. “The History of al Qaeda”. *Brookings Institution*. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2011/09/01-al-qaeda-history-byman> (June 21, 2016).

<sup>45</sup> Basu, Tanya. “Who are the Houthis?”. *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/who-are-yemen-houthis/390111/> (June 21,

rise of the Houthi insurgency is a response to these local grievances.

## CONCLUSION

Radical extremism is a threat not only to the stability of the Middle East, but to the world as a whole. Recent attacks in Paris, Brussels, San Bernardino, and Orlando demonstrate that IS and other groups, whether through inspiration or direct action, constitute a direct threat to the peace and security of nations all over the world. Expansion of terrorist cells into Turkey, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, West Africa, Yemen and Central Asia should be the most immediate concern in contemporary geo-politics due to the ramifications of instability continuing to spread.

As noted in this report, crises will require diverse solutions that are unique to each country and address underlying historical grievances that have developed over time. Finding the root causes of extremist behavior is fundamental to addressing the problem and creating long-term solutions. Although some factors are unique to individual countries, there are commonalities that do exist.

Most significant is the role that oppressive governments play in the birth of insurgency groups and the radicalization of individual citizens. In Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Palestine, Lebanon, and the Gulf countries, state policies have oppressed minorities, violated human rights, and highlighted sectarian differences. This leads to the success of extremist groups who garner legitimacy and support based on their willingness to step in

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and provide for the needs of a marginalized population. Local support and recruitment hinges on this; when governments kill their own citizens, who are these people to turn to except for the extremist group who offers them protection? This has created IS in Iraq and nurtured Sunni rebel groups in Syria after Bashar's crackdown of the revolution in 2011.

The importance of this cannot be overstated, however, that is not to say that other factors are not relevant. IS and al-Nusra rely heavily on the recruitment of foreign fighters – this requires solutions which address the root causes of radicalization in countries outside of Iraq and Syria. Poverty and lack of identity are both factors that contribute to this.

The problem of extremism in the Middle East is not one which will be solved in the near future. It will require complex solutions—military and otherwise—and cooperation between all stakeholders, a necessity that has not been met thus far.

### Images:

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