The Growing of Armed Extremist Groups in Syria and Iraq

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Focused Studies 2

1. Abstract

The issue of the rising armed extremist groups in the Arab World, especially in Syria and Iraq, tops the agendas of many researchers as well as regional and global think tanks. However, relevant writings lack a great deal of objectivity and are associated with presuppositions and stereotypes spread in Western media about Islam, Arabs and the Middle East. Such images and ideas are not based on historical facts, nor do they provide solutions appropriate for the composition and interests of the peoples of the region.

Therefore, the Jordan-based MESC is interested in the issue in its 2nd publication of the Focused Studies series called **The Growing of Armed Extremist Groups in Syria and Iraq**. It consists of two chapters and one appendix.

Chapter One addresses four causes for the growth and popularity of such groups in the practical and intellectual fields as well as the consequences to the overall regional scene. In practice, the first cause is associated with the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, which constituted the initial incubator. The second is about the cycle of violence and counter-violence breaking out between the regimes and opposition forces in 2011-2012, encouraged by the public will to resist the former. In thought, on the other hand, the third has to do with the lack of knowledge of the potential for peaceful change in the region, in general. That assists in consolidating the image of such groups as the only party capable of

Abstract and Table of Contents

introducing the required change. The fourth is about the current crisis witnessed by the Arab political mindset, which promotes division and extremism.

With reference to the repercussions to the region, Chapter One states three of them, regardless of the possible scenarios for the Iraqi and Syrian crises, which cannot be analyzed in isolation from the broader regional picture. As their members come from, and move about, almost all the countries of the region, these groups represent a regional phenomenon. The conflict over the religious and national identities is escalating because of the Arab political thought dilemma, the current violence becoming the only means to solve disputes and the difficulty of rehabilitating these groups' members and integrating them in their societies after the bloody incidents.

At the end of Chapter One, a number of recommendations are made to international and regional powers, such as:

- striving to reinforce the means of political partnership in Iraq and securing guarantees to return all the people's components' confidence in the ruling system and developing institutions able to perform such a mission
- immediately setting a political plan in Syria away from procrastination and laziness, attempting to find out a settlement through neutral mediators who could be credible by both these groups and the regime.

On the other hand, Arab governments are urged to take a serious approach of political development to enhance national identity as well as provide alternative development and legal strategies, which take into consideration the structural motives for the youth to be involved in extremist and armed groups.

Chapter Two investigates two regional cases which assisted in the spread of armed groups in general. Since they do not have a real representative, the Sunni geographical spaces are living a political vacuum. Furthermore, the Arab moderate axis is seeing a rising crisis. Instead of presenting a new political perspective for the region, it is trying to return it to the conditions before the Arab Spring while ignoring the desires of those peoples which ignited the uprisings.

Chapter Two provides an ideological and organizational map for these groups in Syria in February 2014 as well as the changes since 2013. It is important to

Abstract and Table of Contents

differentiate between the ideological groups and the role of religion, on the one hand, and the loose nature of these groups, on the other. The factions' fluctuating calculations and the regional factors bring about shifts in alliances and attitudes. However, the major feature of the war in this country is that it turned from a people's revolution against Al-Assad regime into a sectarian war.

The aforementioned map shows the domination of Islamist Salafism on these groups in Iraq, while secular factions have no weight on the ground. In addition, political Islam movements have been driven out of Syria since the independence, whereas Syrian traditional Salafism is absent from the map. Nevertheless, as the crisis began, new outsider Salafi factions came to the scene to constitute "alien groups."

These groups are divided into three main ideologies: traditional salafism (Originality and Development Front), practical Surouri salafism (Freemen of Levant and Hawks of Levant) and Jihadi salafism (Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State, who are actually different).

In organizational terms, Chapter Two elaborates on five major groups which had arisen by early 2013. However, the map witnessed some change after that due to several factors. For instance, the dispute broadened between the Syrian opposition abroad and the armed groups in the country, and the US was obviously reluctant to intervene. Therefore, the factions decided to re-set their plans. In addition, disagreement broke out between the Turkish-Qatari approach and the Arab agenda, with the latter supporting secular movements and standing against any Islamist ideology in Syria.

Among these key changes are the emergence of the IS and the apparent disagreement between the wings of Al-Qaeda in Syria: the IS – which represents the hardliner thought - and Al-Nusra – which represents 'pragmatism' as Al-Qaeda itself calls it. There was also the Islamic Front in Syria, made of minor factions with 50,000 fighters.

Furthermore, the reviews cover the current projects in the country. Among these are that of Iran to maintain its areas of influence, that of Sunnis seen in the Islamic Front in Syria and supported by Ankara, and that of the IS with its regional

Abstract and Table of Contents

perspective but which is not concerned about the future of Al-Assad. The Iranian and US plans overlap in terms of perpetuating a limited form of chaos, a state which helps the IS in achieving its own targets.

The possible scenarios for Syria are as follows: the victory of Al-Assad; the country's division according to current balances of power; and the conflict's widening to a regional sectarian war. Each could be serious for the future of the region.

The appendix, which comprises the discussion by different scholars and politicians, refers to the crisis of the national state and lack of plurality of parties in the region. As a result, the national identity declined, the sectarian identity took over, moderate Islamist movements were oppressed, peaceful political means of expressions were marginalized and a lot of the Arab youth were pushed into armed and extremist groups.

On the other hand, the appendix warns against the maximization of the IS fighting capabilities, bearing in mind what occurred in Iraq – especially in Falluja – between the tribes of Al-Anbar and the central government. It is noteworthy that the IS uses efficient strategies like limiting the combat with the opposition factions in Syria rather than official army. As it also relies on fatwas allowing for the killing of the Other, the IS managed to expand by means of unprecedented violence. Consequently, it is feared that the charge of the IS would be attached to the Sunni nations in the region in light of the current sectarian dilemma.

Since they do not present a sustainable political project, armed extremist groups historically cannot go beyond violence and counter-violence. In addition, as they depend on foreign sponsorship and support, they fall once they stop receiving them. In fact, a US, Iranian and Israeli role in the Syrian crisis is so possible.

Abstract and Table of Contents

2.Table of Contents