

Analytical paper
Future of Extremist Thought after
DAESH
and Means of Dealing with it



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Introduction:

After the geographic end of Daesh, most writers have focused on the organization's ideological future. Most of them agree that the ideas of ISIS have not died and are still alive, and that the organization, after losing almost the entirety of its space in Syria and Iraq, will in the future develop new strategies, either by resorting to "lone wolf" attacks and sleeper cells or gaining a new space.

In the Syrian context, this subject gains its importance from the fact that a large contingent of extremist thought, such as the remnants of Daesh, a number of the core and leadership of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, and Hurass Al-Din, have gathered in North Syria. This brings up the issue of how to deal with this thought and its consequences, which will require research in strategies, mechanisms and tools to deal with this dangerous phenomenon which has consequences on security, intellectual and societal levels.

In order to present readings foreseeing how to deal with the phenomenon of extremism within the Syrian context after the elimination of Daesh's geographic space, and the return of extremist discourse on the military, media and societal levels, the Syrian Dialogue Center held a group discussion under the title of "Future of Extremist Thought after Daesh and Means of Dealing with it." The group discussed a number of issues, such as trying to foresee what Daesh and like organizations will look like after its military elimination and the expected consequences of the end of Daesh on the intellectual, security, societal and political levels. The discussion also touched on the proper means and tools to treat the negative consequences of this organization's end, strengthen society and heal the disastrous effects this thought, and behavior has had. The discussion was held in Istanbul on Saturday 29 Shabaan 1440 AH/ 4/5/2019 AH.

This report aims to place the reader in the environment of the seminar and its discussion and clarify the general context by clarifying the reasons that motivated it, its importance and its aim. It was prepared according to the "Chatham House"¹ rule, and is not restricted to the chronology of the presentation and interventions. Rather, it has been organized by topic in order to organize the ideas in a smooth and objective manner which can help the reader to understand the contents as much as possible.

¹ The "Chatham House" rule means "At a meeting held under the Chatham House Rule, anyone who comes to the meeting is free to use information from the discussion, but is not allowed to reveal who made any comment. It is designed to increase openness of discussion." Wikipedia

A general perspective of the seminar, its contents and most important points discussed:

The Syrian Dialogue Center has worked early and since its establishment to monitor the phenomenon of extremism and its development and warn against it within the Syrian opposition. It has published studies and held seminars attended by different representatives of the revolutionary and opposition forces, in addition to a number of ulema and credible opinion-leaders², and the establishment of a “discussion group” to continue the Syrian Dialogue Center’s effort to monitor extremism and how to deal with it.

The attendees discussed a number of opinions and ideas through two sessions which lasted for more than three hours according to already determined discussion points. The facilitators allowed for the smooth flow of ideas outside the determined discussion points without a strict chronology in order to empower brainstorming and creativity. The attendees were a diverse mix of researchers and experts in Islamic movements, Sharia studies researchers specialized in extremism studies, media and political activists, and representatives from the opposition forces.

Discussion on the make-up of Daesh and extremist thought in general, and lessons learned and foreseeing the future of extremist organization took up a great degree of the seminar’s time, in addition to deliberation on Daesh’s functional role, moderate Islamic models which can present them, and the social and intellectual effects of the spread of extremist organizations and their thought. We will now turn to present the most important of those ideas discussed.

Evaluation of the make-up of Daesh and similar organizations and extremist thought in general:

A researcher in political Islam was of the opinion that the policy of fighting Daesh using sectarian militias would not have positive consequences after Daesh’s elimination, but would rather lead to inflammations in those areas where it had been active, especially with the continuing political repression and imprisonment, which push youth to extremist organizations. This led a researcher specialized in extremist organizations to consider that Daesh would return to the previous form as a continuation of Al-Qaeda, relieving it of its geographic burdens and needs of people, and resorting to lone wolf attacks and sleeper cells. It would then aim, as one extremist thinker put it

² See for example, the seminars held in the first four months of 2014, which were attended by 60 people. Lately, the Syrian Dialogue Center (link) held, with the participation of the “Cordoba Foundation in Geneva” a seminar under the title of “Towards a Methodological Approach to Confront Extremist Discourse in the Syrian Context through Learned Lessons and Experiences” in Istanbul, on Saturday 22 Rabi’ Al-Akhir 1440 AH/ 12/29/2018 AD.

“One thousand men is enough for us to plant fear in the hearts of people.” He also pointed out that the establishment of a state is relatively abnormal for adherents of extremist thought, which met a large blow to in Syria particularly, considering that Daesh and similar organizations shot themselves in the foot with their authoritarian model, which he described as of being of great service to the Ummah.

In a similar context, an expert on the Iraqi situation considered it a mistake to speak of Daesh’s end as it will soon reappear in a different form, and is still present in the Western regions of Iraq and some of the Eastern regions of Syria. He confirmed what has been previously mentioned that fighting Daesh with sectarian tools push disillusioned youth into Daesh’s embrace, which was demanded in Iraq by some sides with the aim of crushing the popular Iraqi movement. Another Iraqi researcher had witnessed exaggerated numbers of those killed and taken hostage in the obscurity of the issue of Daesh’s “end,” and was of the opinion that many of the organization’s leaders have disappeared and are hiding and waiting for their opportunity to appear once more.

And while discussing the issue previously mentioned from a different angle, a researcher pointed to the necessity of balance while analyzing the subject of Daesh’s end. Despite him being sure that the organization has not been eliminated completely, he saw the end of its previous form, when “flocks” of youth were entering it, as representing a positive step which must be pointed to optimistically. The previous model of Daesh as a “state and caliphate” deceived many of the youth and different segments of society, including educated people, something which has currently ended with the fall of Daesh’s legend and claim of its survival and spread. Another researcher added that no other jihadist organization has been targeted and had its leadership and elements eliminated as did Daesh, which means a practical elimination and that the appearance of Baghdadi with some of his followers held no significance.

The same researcher also emphasized the necessity of differentiating between the spread of an idea and organizations, giving real-life examples, such as the idea of Salafi Jihadism in Jordan which has existed for many years, but has not, in his opinion, led to any jihadi activities or operations in Jordan throughout those many years. Furthermore, the continuation of the thought does not mean the organization had not met its end. An Islamic studies researcher confirmed that extremist thought, and its spread was something determined by Allah's fate for the Ummah, pointing to the prophet's narrations of the khawarij, that they will fight in the ranks of the Anti-Christ at the ends of times. He also implied that current extremist organizations are intelligence organizations and that joining them is not linked to extremist thought only, pointing to a constant development in the behavior of extremist organizations with the rise in intelligence employment. This has pushed some of these groups to undergo pragmatic transformations, as a prelude to a "technocratic government," while staying in control of decision-making processes, while another researcher confirmed that the precedence of thought itself of some thinkers of extremist thought, as he found those ideas in the correspondence of Awlaki with Bin Laden. This has been termed as the "heavy leg theory," by different researchers who have pointed out in their interventions that the evaluation of extremist organizations and thought and its future cannot be separated from their role as tools used by states.

The Role of Extremist Thought and Organizations used as International Tools:

A researcher in Islamic political thought pointed to the issue of the employment of extremist organization by different sides in international conflicts, becoming essential tools used by states to achieve their ends, as they can execute missions that states cannot execute directly, and have now become one of the most important tools used by the "counter-revolution" to rehabilitate corrupt and oppressive regimes. An expert on Iraq while presenting the reasons for the absence of Daesh's end, agreed, as he saw that the need for its use has still continued for most of the actors, from the Americans to the Iranians and the Syrian regime and the democratic forces of Syria. He also confirmed that Daesh's functional role was to terminate the Sunni movement in Iraq, which is the other actors demand its presence.

Another researcher pointed out continuing Russian investment in terrorist organizations, and the issue of "Hayet Tahrir Al-Sham" in North Syria as a seed for the continuing escalation in the region of Idlib. She gave the recent example of the Russian bombardment targeting one of the prisons holding fighters from Daesh, which led to a number of them being able to flee, appearing to be a planned operation by the Russians as a political investment against Turkey and the opposition.

One of the representatives of one of the Syrian armed factions confirmed the clear use of the Daesh to abort the Syrian revolution and distort it and Islam in general, pointing to the attempt to increase people's sympathy of the organization after its massacre in "Baghouz. The idea of extremist organizations being taken advantage of by states brought a connected idea, the idea of them being employed to serve revolutionary goals so long as others are also using them.

Can the revolutionary forces invest in employing extremist forces as the other forces do?

While speaking on the historical roots of extremist sects and their branches, a researcher specialized in extremist groups gave the example of the sect of "assassins" who became famous for their assassination operations in history and tried to kill Salah Ad-Din al-Ayyubi, to change the map of alliances. However, Salah Ad-Din transformed them into an entity which served his goals as he used them to assassinate one of the Crusader kings.

A political official in one of the armed factions was of the opinion that it was not a mistake to benefit from the activities of some of those organizations in fighting the Assad regime, for example, in light of the complex and interwoven situation, without sustaining and supporting them, as long as the regime makes use of sectarian militias and mercenaries from all corners of the world.

However, a political researcher saw that the resulting harms of this sort of investment are double its benefits, especially with regards to the Syrian revolutionary and opposition forces being generalized with this description as well. Another researcher in Islamic political thought supported him in that, pointing that to begin with it is not permissible for the Syrian revolutionary and opposition forces to invest in the phenomenon, as the superpowers invest, in a double standard, in terrorism and fighting it to rehabilitate certain political sides considering them as allies in the "War on Terror" such as the situation of the Syrian democratic forces or the Syrian regime.

Glances of foresight on extremism:

A researcher specialized in extremist groups confirmed that extremist thought was a great blow against the Syrian revolution and its following events, and that the Muslim world has witnessed relative support for the organization of “the Islamic State of Iraq” despite its crimes against many segments of Iraqi society because of its deceiving slogans, something which changed after the Syrian revolution which exposed it. The researcher divided the reasons for the emergence of extremism to objective and internal reasons. Its internal reasons had retreated greatly, which helped in serving a great blow to extremist thought. That is despite the continuation of its objective reasons for existence, such as the sectarian system and political oppression, oppression of security services, financial corruption, attempt to challenge national identity, in addition to the rise of the far-right in the West. Another researcher agreed with him, considering that this issue arises from Syria and Iraq, which exposed the organization’s faults, however the situation was different in a number of Islamic countries, and non-Arab ones in particular, as the language barrier, weakness of Islamic culture and Daesh’s propagation skills worked in their favor to still be attractive.

In the same context, another researcher specialized in extremist groups warned of submitting to the idea of extremism’s retreat, explaining his opinion that the situation of extremism is first and foremost inseparable from the poor security situation. He, furthermore, expected an increase in it, considering that it always increases continually and intensively, especially taking into consideration that breaches that happened in Syrian sharia, civil and military revolutionary bodies, which does not exclude unexpected surprises, especially with the presence of great intellectual gaps which still need to be worked on.

Extremism in light of the absence of models:

Analysis of the phenomenon of extremism and what sustains it took much space in the seminar. Therefore, several interventions agreed upon on the absence of alternative models and projects. One researcher in Sharia studies considered that participating in burning the political alternatives by some Islamic forces, represented by a number of Islamic parties and currents under the umbrella of “democratic,” only increases the youth’s turning to extremist currents. Another researcher then responded that the participation of some Islamic movements in political work could lead in the future to pushing youth towards extremism because of the oppression against Islamic movements and their spending time in prisons through coups after their legitimate arrival to power, as has happened in Egypt and Algeria previously, something which another researcher agreed with, clarifying that the failure of Islamic movements helped dictators in excusing their repeated failures.

A researcher in Islamic thought saw that what causes extremist thought capable of continually reproducing itself is the absence of a Islamic revival project built on the answers of Islam’s true essence, and not imported in light of the repeated cosmetic theories, such as the attempts to assimilate the terms of “democracy and parliament.” A researcher in Sharia studies commented that authenticity in Sharia theories does not contradict with taking from other cultures and civilizations, as the companions themselves did with their openness towards other cultures, something which another researcher, this time in Islamic thought, agreed with, but emphasized at the same time the necessity to distinguish between what can be taken from other cultures and civilizations, and what cannot be absorbed due to its contradiction with Islamic values.

On the other hand, a political expert saw that it would be a mistake to rely on the accommodation of Islamic and political models to the youth’s ambitions that are met by extremist organizations. He pointed out that the situation of reading revolutionary discourse through the eyes of extremists had repeated itself throughout the Syrian revolution. He gave the example of how late a number of armed factions were in depending on the banner of the Syrian revolution, because they had taken into consideration a number of extreme groups. This in turn, resulted in a different pragmatic approach when they were in a situation where they needed their past and previous ideological approaches to a number of issues to not be taken into consideration.

A researcher in Sharia studies, specialized in extremist groups, pointed to the necessity of not considering the demise of extremism as a political project, especially given its current inability to establish an Islamic project, confirming the necessity to limit our expectations given the available abilities and possibilities for partial reform of other projects. He furthermore warned from going along with the youth in their delusions of current Islamic projects. An Islamic researcher added that it was natural for extremism to grow given the absence of alternatives, or as it is known in the Islamic tradition as “Sunna kills bidaa (deviation)” and these cases will only increase in light of the absence of ulema interacting with youth. A political representative of one of the armed factions agreed, pointing to the prophetic narration which describes the situation of extremists as “they would come forth at the time when there is dissension among Muslims.” Furthermore, they take advantage of the absence of a social contract and internal cohesion. Another political researcher agreed with this and pointed to the growth of extremist groups in environments where people think their states and institutions to have failed, as is the case in Syria and Iraq, as these organizations filled the gap that resulted from the absence of the state and social cohesion between the different social groups.

The Social and Cultural Effects of the Spread of Extremist Organizations:

A researcher in Islamic thought pointed to the existence of the long-lasting effects of extremist thought and organizations through the presence of many adherents’ families and children, who will probably carry the victimhood of their fathers and relatives, especially with the oppression that is happening against by the society on account of their fathers and relatives. She pointed to the mass detainings in reconciliation areas of the wives and relatives of those accused of belonging to extremist groups by the Syrian regime, in addition to the other forms of oppression, such as the counter-revolution and the “Deal of the Century” that renew the sustenance of these extremist groups. Another researcher pointed to the situation of residents in Northern Syria, who face the Russian and Syrian regime’s escalation without any option other than confrontation, which could prepare the situation for the development of extremism, especially with the inability of the armed factions to stop this offensive because of their competing for power over resources and regions.

On the other hand, another researcher saw that it would be an exaggeration to see the members of extremist groups and their families as projects to spread extremism, because of the good percentage of them that entered for material and armament motivations and not in belief of those organizations’ ideologies.

As did another researcher direct attention to the cases of revenge against members of Daesh which happened in some cities in Northern Syria, which will probably repeat themselves. He also, in addition, cited the formation of the some women belonging to Daesh of a group to “apply the Sharia” in one of the camps they were gathered in, which points to the deep long-lasting influences of extremist ideas planted by the organization and which resulted in societal cracks because of the fighting between Daesh and the armed factions. Another researcher pointed to extremist organizations’ playing to youths’ emotions through using “Jihadi nasheeds”, which quickly affect them emotionally and spiritually, especially with the use of issues affecting the Ummah in their lyrics.

Lessons learned in Dealing with Extremist Thought and Organizations:

While speaking on what practices and factors sustain extremists, and the absence of alternative models for youth, many of the speakers had little glimpses and insights which could be considered lessons we have learned in how to deal with extremism and its organizations. Therefore, they spoke of the possibility in investing in extremist organization as a model taken up by other forces, as mentioned above. One researcher was of the opinion that Syrian societal complications and their experience with extremist organizations could lead to their being forced to a cautious gradual dealing with “Jahhat An-Nusra” after the complete separation of the revolution from Daesh, despite that this could lead later to the legitimation of “Jahbat An-Nusra within the revolutionary and opposition forces through coordinating with them in alliances and operations in the hope of encouraging them to moderation, and lately the “Hayet Tahrir Al-Sham,” something which seems futile given the continuing aggression of “Jabhat An-Nusra against all other forces. This leads one to wonder how correct policies of gradation and containment were, at the time when some are following a policy of complete separation from all extremist organizations or those groups influenced by them. One researcher was of the opinion that “Hayet Tahrir Al-Sham” could actually transform to a local organization distant from “global jihad,” that would be fully ready to hold deals with nations to continue its existence. A previous politician with one of the armed factions agreed, concluding that this issue as a complicated one should be dealt with cautiously, the correctness of benefiting from this organization’s existence in military operations against the regime, and investing in other organizations like it, and even if at the very least to prevent or delay a costly confrontation.

In the same context, a Sharia studies researcher specialized in extremist movement saw the necessity of differentiating between practical stances and military and security stances, as-according to his opinion- practical purposes must be completely separate from all forms of extremism to have a united Syria. However, as for security and military stances, the forces should move tactically according to interests. Another researcher also specialized in extremist movements agreed with him on the necessity of complete separation from these organizations even with regards to civil coordination, whereas an expert on Iraq was of the opinion that it was necessary to differentiate between different extremist organization in their discourse while dealing with them, given the need to “not unite different enemies at the same time” as he put it.

A researcher commented on dealing with some of the intellectual angles and dimensions related to extremism, as he saw the necessity of strengthening the discourse of Maqasid Ash-Sharia (Higher Aims of Sharia), with the need to pass over many “old ijthadat in fiqh,” which extremists rely on in strengthening their discourse. He gave the specific examples of considering disbelief as the *casus belli* for fighting and continuing to use the phrases “dar al-kufr and dar al-Islam,” which allows extremists to use those terms to reduce and simplify Sharia discourse to increase their spread among the youth.

A researcher pointed to the importance or rehabilitating female preachers to address women, pointing to the existence of a great lack in this subject, especially given the great hold that their beliefs have over the women of Daesh as can be seen in their practices in the Al-Hool refugee camp and the interviews held with them by television channels. She also pointed to the necessity of the use of means of soft power, social media, and caricature cartoons which can more easily reach into people’s consciences in general. This focus on soft power means and the role of those modern means in imparting certain impressions upon youth’s hearts was agreed upon by a researcher in extremist organizations. A Sharia studies researcher pointed to the necessity of carrying a specialized elite discourse, by a number of specialists, with a number of essential agreed upon points in media discourse, so as to not fall into the details except on that specialized level.

How Should the Opposition Approach the Issue of Foreign Fighters?

After speaking on extremism brought up the issue of foreign fighters in the ranks of extremist organizations, a political activist intervened with a research paper he had worked on with a group of activists which answers an important question related to the vision of the national opposition on the issue of foreign fighters: does the opposition envision submitting them to their own countries or trying them in Syria? Or fighting them? He emphasized that the fight with extremism is to the utmost degree an internal Syrian battle and not the fight of other nations or forces. Furthermore, the activist saw the necessity of linking this issue to the end solution in Syria, and the securance of just courts to try all of the foreign fighters who committed crimes, and in a manner equal with Syrians, for it would not be just to submit them to their countries in the case that they do not guarantee just courts, warning from falling for such discourses that would call for that, which would only lead to push them to aggression against the national opposition and its forces. He confirmed the necessity of dealing with this issue from the starting points of the nation and Sharia, and in confirmation with human rights, for it is not okay to submit any person to authorities who do not guarantee his rights and right to a fair trial, and that at the same time it would be okay to work with different nations according shared legal conventions, confirming the necessity of separating the different Syrian opposition groups form extremism, through a number of procedures and practices, such as sticking to the unifying banner of the Syrian revolution by all of the different factions.

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