

## Experts and Researchers Discuss the Effect of the Phenomenon of Extremism

The Syrian Dialogue Center continued its researching of the phenomenon of extremism through its special track launched in participation with several ulema and opinion leaders since 2015 with its new seminar lately held in Istanbul with the title **“The Phenomenon of Extremism: Its Effects and Consequences”**.

The seminar presented three research papers, the first by Mahdi Al-Hilali was **“Extremism in the Iraqi Case and the Extent of its Past and Future Effects.”** The second paper was entitled **“A Glance at the Consequences and Transformations of Extremist Discourse”** by Imad Ad-Din Khayti and the third paper, **“The Social Effects of Extremist Thought in the Syrian Context: The Case of the Northern Liberated Areas,”** was presented by Raghda Zaydan.

What follows is a summary of the most prominent contents of the three papers presented during the seminar:

### Extremism in the Iraqi Case:

The first speaker opened up his paper noting that this phenomenon which Syria also faced is not unique to this age, but rather a case found in different times and places. However, it changes in its severity from one region to the next according to the social and political conditions and is found not just among extremist groups or khawarij, but is found in a number of different Muslim and non-Muslim schools and sects.

The paper demonstrated how extremism helped block the crystallization of a national Iraqi resistance project against the American invasion, due to extremist organizations’ targeting of Iraqi opposition groups and weakening or eliminating them, which led to the preponderance of those extremist groups, who provoked the international community with their violent discourse.

The paper also touched on how Daesh struck the Iraqi Sunni movement during the government of the previous president Nouri Al-Maliki, as it pushed the latter to direct protestors to arm themselves in order to defend themselves. It also

opened the way for Daesh to enter those cities outside of his control. Daesh as such monopolized the resistance, which made Maliki's government appear to be fighting an international criminal organization.

The paper researched the relation of the previous leadership in the Baath party and the previous Iraqi regime with Daesh, the current and previous level of popular support for Daesh, and its popular, financial and military situation at the current time in Iraq.

The paper argued that Daesh did not possess actual popular support in Iraq, but rather the cases of popular support were due to a desire to get rid of the ruling sectarian government in Iraq, as well as some Iraqi youth not well guarded against extremist ideas who got involved with extremist groups in reaction to sectarian crimes which many groups of the Iraqi people were exposed to.

On the current situation of Daesh in Iraq, the paper discussed the transformation in its leadership in containing the current defeat by relying on previous experiences, as it resorted to hiding in rugged and desert terrains, and relying on hit-and-run tactics in the Diyali, Salahuddin, and West Kirkuk regions.

Daesh has sufficient resources to manage the coming stage, both financially through the taxes it collected from residents, and in terms of popular support and it aims to take advantage of the discontent of Sunnis as a result of the demographic change and oppression.

### **The Features of Contemporary Extremism and its Future Consequences:**

The second speaker discussed his paper "A Glance at the Consequences and Transformations of Extremist Discourse," which focused on the features of contemporary extremism and its future consequences.

The paper determined nine features of contemporary extremism and extremist organizations: the allowing of spilling Muslim blood after unlawfully making takfir of them, such as Jabhat An-Nusra which has changed its features several times but always continued in allowing for the spilling of blood; constant contradiction of Muslim consensus and Islam's clear rules; relying on the

writings of extremist proselytizers and; being influenced by other extremist schools, which they then cover up as being Islamic, such as being influenced by the communism in how to arrive to power.

The other features are adopting extremism for the sake of interests; making their leader sacred; relying on dreams and prophetic narrations related to the end of times; taking advantage of any justification to achieve their ends, such as using the principle of walaa and baraa against any opponent, and the last feature is their readiness for militarization and playing functional roles for state actors.

As for the consequences of contemporary extremism, the paper determined three possibilities. The first is the transition of a number of extremists to moderation, and refusing their previous quotes. This does not, however, necessarily mean the breaking up the contract of extremists, as their constant splitting up into further groups is well-known. As for the second consequence, it is increase of extremism and deviation, which would be a sign of even more extreme ideas and hybrid schools taking from other trends.

The third is an increase of states and their intelligence services employing them, with those organizations, being employed or affiliated with them one way or another.

The speaker concluded his paper by reminding of the need to monitor these groups and follow their ideas, study the factors affecting them, even if they seem to be inactive, in order to be able to understand their future goals and to plan for them.

### **The Reality of Extremism and Its Manifestations in North Syria:**

The speaker commenced her paper by pointing to the difference in living standards and services between the areas controlled by Hayet Tahrir Al-Sham and the areas of “Olive Branch” and “Euphrates Shield,” which is reflected in the state of society in those regions, in addition to the presence of thousands of displaced migrants who came from different regions of Syria, making their social reality different from what it was before. The deteriorating economic situation of

these regions and the spread of unemployment and poverty with the continuing war and lack of stability has reflected negatively on the solidarity and relations between people.

According to the paper, several features of extremism can be monitored in Northern Syria, such as making takfir of people based on certain behaviors or quotes or making takfir of prominent people in the revolution due to their stance on negotiating with Russia or the Syrian regime. This is in addition to the spread of phrases stemming from extremist thought, such as “Democracy is Kufr,” and the spread of “Al-Hisba” in areas controlled by Hayet Tahrir Al-Sham and their following of stores selling cigarettes and the degree of mixing of genders and women’s wearing of hijab.

Some other spread manifestations are describing any religious authorities who did not take part in combat as traitors and not taking their fatwas, the influence of wives of extremist soldiers before being separated from them, the continuing of marrying from foreign fighters from the Turkmenistan Islamic Party or Hayet Tahrir Al-Sham, and the spread of Afghan clothing among the men.

Something positive that the region is seeing according to the researcher is that these features have started to retreat in the area controlled by Hayet Tahrir Al-Sham and are almost completely absent in the areas of the “Olive Branch” and Euphrates Shield” operations, in addition to the increase in female police officers and the supervision of the Turkish Diyanet over nearly 110 masjids and preventing them from touching on any subject encouraging extremism.

The researcher was of the opinion that the phenomenon of extremism in North Syria led to social effects, the most prominent of which were the social breakdown and polarization between the group that adopts extremism and try to force it by power and another group which resists extremism.

Of the other effects also are the refusal of a large number of people to empathize with the refugees and migrations from other parts of Syria, an increase in isolation between social groups, as well as the spread of superficial and external religiosity in addition to the retreat of observing Islam’s actual content, the

narrowing of fields an individual may participate in, the raise in cases of domestic and social violence, outbreaks of revenge between families, especially those suspected of belonging to Daesh cells, and the presence of extremist organization which created a justification for the bombing of Idlib.

The researcher concluded her paper with a number of recommendations, such as spreading the correct understanding of religion to lighten the severity of extremism, pay attention to children's education and opening up space for them to express their opinions and take part in dialogue, taking care of women and giving them a correct education in Sharia and having them participate in social issues, spreading a culture of dialogue and working to hold seminars which allow for people in Northern Syria to express their opinions.