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Radicalisation in the Mediterranean Region: Old and New Drivers

by Andrea Dessì



ABSTRACT

This report summarises the proceedings of an international conference held in Ankara on 14 December 2015 jointly organised by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the Centre for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM) in the framework of the New-Med Research Network. Invited participants, drawn from a mix of academics, researchers and policy-makers, convened in Turkey to discuss the pressing challenges of instability and radicalism in the Mediterranean region, examine its contemporary and historical drivers and debate means to curtail the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters travelling to join extremist groups in Syria, Iraq and other locations in the Middle East and North Africa. The conference marked the seventh meeting of the New-Med Research Network, an ongoing “Track II” initiative that aims to create a network of analysts, practitioners and research centres to foster dialogue and an exchange of ideas on contemporary security issues in the Mediterranean, thereby also supporting the objectives of the OSCE-Mediterranean Partnership. The Network is developed by IAI in collaboration with the OSCE Secretariat, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the Compagnia San Paolo of Turin and the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF).

Middle East | North Africa | Religion | Islamic groups | Terrorism



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by Andrea Dessì*

Introduction

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the Centre for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM) organised an international conference on radicalism in the Mediterranean region in Ankara on 14 December 2015. Convened in the framework of the New-Med Research Network, the event saw the participation and support of various governmental and non-governmental entities including the Foreign Ministries' of Italy and Turkey, the OSCE Secretariat, the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) and the Compagnia San Paolo of Turin.

Launched in 2014, the New-Med Research Network aims to create a network of analysts, practitioners and research centres from both sides of the Mediterranean to foster dialogue and an exchange of ideas on contemporary security trends in the Mediterranean region. Within this framework, the Network also aims to create formal avenues for cooperation in support of the objectives of the OSCE-Mediterranean Partnership. Since its inception, the New-Med Network has organised seven international conferences and workshops and published twenty-two research papers on various themes tied to Euro-Med relations.¹ Most recently, the Network has produced an in-depth report and an edited volume containing a collection of studies on the current migration crisis in the Mediterranean.²

¹ For more information on the New-Med Research Network, including access to published papers and past events, please visit the IAI website, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/2004>. See also the OSCE website: <http://www.osce.org/networks/newmedtrackII>.

² Paola Monzini, Nourhan Abdel Aziz and Ferruccio Pastore, *The Changing Dynamics of Cross-Border Human Smuggling and Trafficking in the Mediterranean*, Rome, IAI, October 2015, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/5522>; Lorenzo Kamel (ed.), *Changing Migration Patterns in the Mediterranean*, Rome, Nuova Cultura, November 2015 (IAI Research Papers 22), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/5702>.

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· Report of the international conference "Radicalization in the Mediterranean Region: Old and New Drivers" held in Ankara on 14 December 2015 and jointly organised by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the Centre for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM) in the framework of the New-Med Research Network.

Invited participants for the Ankara conference were drawn from a variety of backgrounds, including members from academia, think tanks and diplomatic practitioners from Europe, Turkey and the MENA region. The diverse profiles of the participants allowed for a fruitful dialogue that combined a policy-oriented approach to the issues of instability and radicalism in the Mediterranean with an academic focus that is mindful of those historical and multi-casual drivers that have created a regional context highly conducive to the emergence (and resilience) of these trends. Divided in three sessions, the one-day conference began by contextualising the problem of instability in the MENA region by focussing on a number of themes that are often highlighted as the root causes for this phenomenon. Participants then moved to discuss the threat of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) while seeking to clarify the complex mixture of motivations that push individuals to join extremist groups in the region or to carry out attacks in their name. Finally, in the third session of the conference, participants debated the relationship between religion and politics in the region, exploring whether radicalism and instability has more to do with the former over the latter.

The conference began with the welcoming remarks by **Şaban Kardaş**, President of ORSAM, and Massimo Carnelos, from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Both speakers emphasised the timely nature of the meeting while highlighting how the idea of the conference had originated before the recent string of attacks in Lebanon, Turkey, France and the United States. **Massimo Carnelos** emphasised the necessity of not overreacting to these events and avoid being excessively influenced by the media frenzy that has followed in their wake. In warning against the use of simplistic terminology to frame the motivations for these attacks, the Italian diplomat spoke of the need to differentiate between the radicalisation paths of individuals in Europe and the Arab world while emphasising that no clear categorisation exists for the profile of individuals at risk of becoming radicalised. Poverty and economic exclusion, often touted as key motivating factors, are important variables but cannot on their own account for the spread and resilience of radical ideologies. Social exclusion, ethnic and sectarian divisions exacerbated by geopolitical tensions, the shortcomings of globalisation and a more general sense of marginalisation among Muslim communities in Europe, particularly among second generation youth, all represent important drivers that must be taken into account when attempting to understand the phenomena of radicalism and foreign fighters.

In a keynote address before the commencement of the first session, **Ibrahim Kalin**, Spokesperson and senior advisor to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President of the Turkish Republic, emphasised the need to place the phenomenon of radicalism within an international context in which extremism, in various forms and manifestations, is by no means limited to groups such as Daesh (the self-proclaimed "Islamic State," also known as ISIS/ISIL) or Al-Qaeda. Citing the text *Age of Extremes* by British historian Eric Hobsbawm, Kalin highlighted how examples of extremism are also found in Europe, the US and further afield, as evidenced by the political debate on Muslims and Islam among Republican candidates in the US elections, the rise of far-right parties in Europe or in the declarations by certain Eastern European leaders in the wake of the migration crisis. Further examples include the brutal repression

of the Syrian revolution by the Assad regime, violence in Ukraine and the anti-Muslim discriminatory policies enacted in Myanmar for example, which the speaker noted did not give rise to much sympathy among Western audiences.

Criticising the tendency to associate radicalism with a set of issues that are mostly tied to Islam and the Muslim faith, Kalin emphasised that extremism is in fact a global problem

and that Islam, more often than not, serves as a simple cover to mask the real objectives of these groups tied to material power and recognition. Radicalism therefore is not inherently linked to the Mediterranean, but instead reflects, and in many ways is a reaction to, current international trends that are themselves part of the problem, from the adverse socio-economic effects of globalisation to the resurgence of identity politics and nationalisms. Global solutions are therefore required, and these can only come about through international cooperation, understanding and moderation. In recognising the severe threat of Daesh, and emphasising Turkey's commitment to fight the group, Kalin also criticised the international community for not assuming a similar stance towards the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Turkey considers a violent, terrorist organisation on par with Daesh.

Highlighting the need to restore Islam's rich heritage of coexistence and understanding, Kalin spoke of the need to assume a two-pronged approach to radicalism that addresses both its ideational and socio-economic roots. In this context, religious leaders and inter-faith dialogue will prove essential in order to counter the poisonous narratives of such groups as Daesh and Al-Qaeda, but such measures will prove effective only when audiences consider these leaders legitimate and their narrative convincing. Such legitimacy will depend on their ability to tackle the many political and socio-economic grievances felt by large segments of the Muslim world, whether these be a solution to the brutal civil war in Syria, the emergence of an independent Palestinian state, the lack of socio-economic opportunities, political representation or mounting discrimination and Islamophobia in the Western media. In ending his address, Kalin emphasised the role played by Turkey as the host of the recent G20 summit in Antalya in promoting a united statement by world leaders on the fight against terrorism and violent extremism,³ noting however that much more remains to be done in order to foster a truly international response to the phenomenon.



Keynote address by Ibrahim Kalin

³ G20 Statement on the Fight Against Terrorism, Antalya, 16 November 2015, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/11/16-g20-leaders-antalya-statement-terrorism>.

Session I: How it was, how it is: root causes of the current regional instability

Speakers in session one debated a number of trends that have repeatedly come to the fore in contemporary discussions on the root causes of instability and radicalism in the Middle East and North Africa. Thus, **Toby Matthiesen**, Senior Research Fellow at Oxford University, spoke about sectarianism and Sunni-Shi'a rivalry examining its repercussions in terms of inter-state competition in the region. Highlighting how the issue of sectarianism has become something of a simplistic catch-all dynamic used to frame the persistence of instability in the Middle East, Matthiesen emphasised how the violent sectarianism witnessed today in such places as Iraq, Syria or the Gulf is a relatively new phenomenon that has more to do with the political goals of regime balancing and survival than ancient schisms within the Muslim faith dating back to the early seventh century. Behind the present focus on Sunni-Shi'a rivalry lays the perennial competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, two major states that have been vying for a leadership role in the region even before the advent of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. An excessive focus on sectarianism therefore risks obscuring the deeper reality of geopolitical competition between state and non-state actors in the region, a dynamic that when juxtaposed over a regional layout characterised by entrenched authoritarianism and mutual mistrust has led to the repeated use of ethnicity and identity politics as a tool to extend political influence abroad while consolidating regime survival at home.

In tracing the advent of sectarianism as an important extension of international relations in the Middle East, Matthiesen identified the 1979 revolution in Iran as the key watershed moment, emphasising however that it was the reaction to this event by states in the region and further afield rather than the event itself that is significant for the rise of sectarianism as a political tool in the Middle East. As a result of the worsening geopolitical standoff between Iran and Saudi Arabia that followed, growing in particular in the context of the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s and more recently following the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, Gulf States' as well as Iran have employed virulent sectarian narratives to frame their struggle for regional influence. The emergence of Arabic-language satellite TV channels based in the Gulf have contributed to making this discourse mainstream. Today with social media and other tools, this sectarian discourse is further expanding with new groups such as Daesh also latching on to its message. Significantly, warned Matthiesen, sectarianism risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, posing serious risks not only regionally but also domestically, given that such discourse undermines the social cohesion of states, thereby contributing to a vicious circle of mistrust and insecurity that is fuelling instability throughout the region.

The second presentation was given by **Moshe Ma'oz**, Professor in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who spoke about the role of religious nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its impact on regional stability. In noting how sectarianism has played a marginal role in the context of

Israel/Palestine, Ma'oz spoke about how Israelis and Palestinians have gradually, since the 1967 war, adopted religious narratives to frame their national struggles and how these narratives have become more extreme and uncompromising over time, particularly during the late 1970s and 1980s. Before the 1967 war religion was no doubt employed by both the Zionist and Palestinian camps but at the time this discourse was still largely pragmatic, as demonstrated by the limited focus on the importance of Jerusalem and its holy sites in Zionist narratives before the war for example.

Speaking at a time when tensions and violence is on the rise, with almost daily knife attacks carried out by young Palestinians' and the consequent reprisals by the Israeli army, the Israeli Professor emphasised how Jerusalem and its holy sites – the Haram Al-Sharif or Temple Mount in particular – have emerged as the focal points of the conflict, reflecting the growing importance of religious symbols for the national struggles of the two people. The second intifada itself, known in Arabic as the Al-Aqsa intifada, was focussed on Jerusalem, and in particular on the Al-Aqsa mosque. Today, as a result of the provocative actions of certain right-wing Israeli politicians and groups who are defying bans on Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount and the reaction by Palestinian figures who fear plans to restrict Muslim prayer times or even to demolish Islam's holy sites in order to rebuild the Jewish Temple, there is a severe risk of relighting the fire of the conflict and as a result further increasing religious-nationalistic sentiments in the Holy Land and the wider region. Religion, however, is only part of the problem, given that it is essentially political rights and recognition that is pushing Palestinian youth to commit such desperate acts.

Turning to the issue of ethnicity, **Lorenzo Kamel**, Senior Fellow at IAI and Research Fellow (2013-17) at Harvard University, addressed the increasingly common notion that ethnic diversity and the colonial legacy of state borders in the Middle East represent the root causes of instability in the region. In criticising the notion that ethnically homogeneous states would somehow ameliorate the underlining causes of regional instability, Kamel emphasised that socio-economic inequality and exclusion, authoritarianism, foreign interventionism and the use of identity politics by various regimes in the region and external powers are closer to the mark in helping to explain the persistence of instability in the Middle East. Describing the thesis put forth by scholars such as Joshua Landis and Robin Wright, among others, both of whom have argued or implied that the present violence and instability in the region are a result of a slow and bloody reorganisation of regional borders, or, as Landis has put it, a "great sorting out"⁴ of ethnicity and borders that has some parallels with the outcome of World War II in Eastern Europe, Kamel reminded his audience that the thesis of a 1,400 year-long war between Sunni and Shia Muslims, increasingly mentioned in our days, tends to overlook that the belonging to a certain sect had been for centuries just one, often secondary, way of expressing

⁴ Joshua Landis, "The Great Sorting Out: Ethnicity & the Future of the Levant", in *Qifa Nabki*, 18 December 2013, <http://wp.me/pitIS-1P4>.

one's identity. Thus, today perhaps more than ever, it is important to shed light on the dynamics through which regional and external political actors have turned communities into political tools, stirring ethnic tensions to serve their geopolitical goals.

Indeed, and similarly to what was discussed above regarding sectarianism, religious and ethnic diversities are not a cause of instability in and of themselves, but rather have contributed to instability given the actions of regional and international states and/or actors which have exacerbated these divisions. Thus, with the aim of strengthening the local Alawite-Shiite components, Bashar Al-Assad, supported by Teheran, stripped citizenship to thousand refugees, not renewing their ID cards and making possession of updated biometric documents compulsory. Lebanon, on the other hand, now hosts over one million new Sunni refugees, while Daesh is forcing a large number of non-Sunni Iraqis' to emigrate, with the aim of creating a largely homogenous Sunni demographic reality in the territory it controls. Even today, however, it is worth remembering that Baghdad hosts hundreds of thousand of Kurds that have never suffered any violence of sectarian nature, that the major Sunni city of Samarra is home to two important Shi'a ruins and that many Sunni's still live in Iraqi cities like Basra, in the predominantly Shi'a south of the country. In examining the many causes for the present instability in the region, Kamel also emphasised how the US-led "War on Terror" has actually contributed to this instability, citing recent data from the US State Department that points to a 6,500 percent rise in terror attacks since 2002, half of them occurring in Iraq and Afghanistan. Expressing his view that homogeneous states in the Middle East represent something of a detrimental and ahistorical solution that cannot resolve the many complex issues plaguing the region, Kamel reminded the audience of Gramsci's work on power systems and change. What we are witnessing today in the region is in many ways what Gramsci defined as an "interregnum." While the final outcome of this "interregnum" is still uncertain, the aspects that will likely affect it the most are related to ongoing demographic trends. Deconstructing these trends, Kamel argued, is a precondition for any serious attempt to stabilise the region.

The final speaker in session one, **Benoît Challand**, Associate Professor of Sociology at the New School for Social Research in New York, moved the discussion to focus on the (de)stabilising impact of foreign aid in the MENA region. In introducing his argument, Challand noted how radicalism in the region should not be limited to talk about Daesh, Al-Qaeda or regime repression in Syria, but also include the demands for radical political and socio-economic reform emanating from the so-called Arab Spring protests of 2011. In this context, foreign aid, usually considered a stabilising force and no doubt a key ingredient for the success of the transitions in such countries as Tunisia and Egypt, has also had profoundly destabilising effects. In considering the impact of foreign aid, discussion should not be limited to US or European assistance, but also include that coming from the Gulf States, first and foremost Saudi Arabia, which has far outstripped that coming from the West while being motivated by considerably different objectives. In addition to Saudi Arabia, foreign aid coming from regional states like Turkey has also increased substantially in the past years. The lack of coordination and the often competing objectives of

these states have added complexity to the task of measuring the impact of foreign aid in the region.

Turning to Western aid, Challand noted how Europe and the US have adopted different definitions, with America also including military aid in the net total of foreign assistance. US military aid in the region is by far the most substantial component of American aid and as such focus on the total US aid by year is misleading, not least given that a great majority of this assistance is effectively recycled back into the US economy through arms purchases, maintenance and modernisation contracts. Giving the example of Iraq, Challand highlighted how US development assistance between 1946-2010 totalled over 34.7 billion dollars, more than that given to Israel (34.128 billion dollars) or Egypt (30.514 billion dollars). These figures are again misleading however, given that in the case of Iraq much of this assistance was recycled back to the US by granting reconstruction contracts to US companies and contractors instead of employing local resources or labour. This, in turn, has contributed to Iraqi resentment towards the US and in the long run has had the opposite of the desired effect, namely increasing instability and anti-Americanism in the country while not improving social services for the population.

Addressing European development assistance, Challand noted how, as a result of budget cuts and the financial crisis, European aid has contracted, contributing to a significant decline of influence in the region. Europe's much taunted "more for more" slogan that was supposed to encapsulate the EU's response to the Arab uprisings has not materialised and, if anything, Europe's response may be more correctly summarised under the heading "less for the same." Highlighting the case studies of Iraq, Egypt and Tunisia, Challand concluded by noting that quantity does not equal quality in measuring the impact of aid in the region. Tunisia, where international and regional aid dismemberments have a greater degree of harmonisation compared to Egypt and where military aid represents a small fraction of the total, still represents a "positive laboratory" in the region, a potential test case of the benefits of a more coordinated and harmonised approach to foreign assistance that is capable of harnessing both the civilian and military dimensions of assistance to attain more positive, stabilising effects on the ground.

Session II: The phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters explained

In session two, invited speakers debated the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters travelling to join extremist groups in Iraq, Syria and other locations in the MENA region. In opening the discussion, **Lisa Watanabe**, from the Centre for Security Studies at ETH Zürich, presented the results of a major study on the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters travelling from various North African countries to join the ranks of Daesh or the Al-Qaeda affiliated Nusra Front.⁵ Based on the case

⁵ Lisa Watanabe, "Foreign Fighters and Their Return: Measures Taken by North African Countries", in *CSS Studies*, October 2015, http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/DetailansichtPubDB_EN?rec_

studies of Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Morocco, the report examines the policy responses enacted by North African countries to protect against the threat of fighters returning to their home countries and their efforts to promote effective de-radicalisation and reintegration programmes. In highlighting the fact that the great majority of foreign terrorist fighters originate from the Middle East and North Africa and not Europe, Watanabe emphasised the legal and institutional limits of the present response enacted by regional states. With the exception of Algeria, whose past history and close vicinity to the conflict in Libya led the government to react with a number of measures in late 2012, other North African countries only began focusing on the issue of foreign fighters in 2014, when growing numbers of these began returning to their home countries.

Citing recent estimates of over 30,000 foreign fighters having travelled to join extremist groups in Syria and Iraq since 2011, Watanabe noted how 3,000 fighters were thought to have come from Tunisia, over 1,000 from Morocco, hundreds from Egypt and less than 100 from Algeria, while no estimates were available for Libya. In this regard, Libya was singled out as the country with the least effective preventive measures, given the collapse of state institutions and internal political conflicts. Morocco and Tunisia, on the other hand, were highlighted as countries that adopted the most promising approach to the phenomenon, with both states employing a mixture of hard and soft tools and having comparatively advanced legal frameworks to deal with the phenomenon. While challenges remain, both Morocco and Tunisia have refrained from adopting a purely repressive and criminalising approach, complementing this with some efforts to improve avenues for the peaceful reintegration of individuals through de-radicalisation programmes and other means. Algeria and Egypt, however, have largely limited their response to the hard tools of repression and lengthy jail terms, efforts that risk repeating the mistakes of the past while not helping to counter the underlining political, socio-economic and ideational drivers the push individuals to join these groups.

Dietrich Jung, Professor of Contemporary Middle East Studies at the University of Southern Denmark, continued the discussion by performing a comparative analysis of the phenomenon of foreign fighters. Arguing that the present trend of young individuals travelling to fight in faraway wars is by no means new, the Professor highlighted a number of historical parallels, from Europeans joining Greeks in Anatolia to fight against the Ottomans or Americans' travelling to fight in the Spanish Civil war. In noting that many volunteers who travelled to fight in the Spanish Civil War were motivated by a general belief about fighting injustice and oppression and that many did not have in depth knowledge about Socialism and its ideals, Jung drew a parallel with the motivating divers that are today pushing individuals to join Daesh or other groups in the Middle East. Reiterating that many foreign recruits travelling to Syria and Iraq do not have extensive knowledge of Islam and its teachings, Jung noted how ideology and Islam do not provide convincing explanations. Indeed, highlighting a second historical parallel with

past, an important framework to understand the phenomenon is to focus on the local and regional support networks that assist these individuals in travelling to join such groups. Here, as was the case with the Spanish Civil war or with the resistance against the Soviet presence in Afghanistan for example, states continue to be the major, behind-the-scenes, players that facilitate the expansion of the phenomenon. In order to more effectively respond to the challenge, the cost-benefit analysis of states that promote the use of such forces must be altered as a means to highlight the potential for blowback and risks to their own internal security connected to the phenomenon of foreign fighters. The mounting numbers of individuals returning to their home countries from Iraq and Syria has today heightened the threat perceptions of many of these states. Policy reactions have however been slow, and while there is some evidence of a change in perception in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, it is too early to tell whether the lessons of the past have in fact been internalised by the ruling elites in these countries.

The final presentations in session two were delivered by **Haldun Yalçinkaya**, Associate Professor in international relations at TOBB University in Ankara, who spoke about the threat of foreign terrorist fighters to Turkey and Cemil Kılınç, from the Hedayah Centre on violent extremism. In outlining the significant threat posed to Turkey by Daesh and other extremist groups, Haldun Yalçinkaya stressed how Turkey has so far experienced seven terrorist attacks that have caused 144 deaths and over 800 injured. Given Turkey's vicinity to the conflict zone in Iraq and Syria, its large Muslim population and long southern border, the threat posed to the country was estimated as being three times higher than for Europe. As international reactions have moved to also promote legal frameworks aimed at defining and countering the threat of foreign terrorist fighters, in particular through the adoption of UNSC resolution 2187,⁶ Turkey has also begun improving its responses by fortifying parts of its border and considerably increasing intelligence gathering and other preventive measures. Citing recent statistics of individuals included on Turkey's no-entry list, these were said to have increased from 297 in December 2011 to over 19,000 in September 2015. Recognising that many Turkish nationals have travelled to join Daesh or the Nusra Front in Iraq and Syria, and that the threat of them returning to create support networks in Turkey or to carry out attacks in the country is severe, Yalçinkaya also cautioned against an excessive focus on these groups to the detriment of other organisations that are deemed to pose similar threats. In echoing the remarks made by Ibrahim Kalın at the opening of the conference, Yalçinkaya expressed concern for the activities of the PKK in Turkey and the growing links between this group and Kurdish fighters in Syria.

In closing the session, **Cemil Kılınç** outlined the work and activities of the Hedayah Centre on violent extremism.⁷ Founded in 2012 with its headquarters in Abu Dhabi, the Hedayah Centre of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism

⁶ UN Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014), 24 September 2014, [http://undocs.org/S/RES/2178\(2014\)](http://undocs.org/S/RES/2178(2014)).

⁷ For more information on the Hedayah Centre please visit the website, <http://hedayah.ae>.

was established by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) following a 2011 decision made at the ministerial-level meeting of the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF) in New York. The GCTF is an informal, multilateral counterterrorism (CT) platform that focuses on identifying critical civilian CT needs, mobilising the necessary resources and expertise to address such needs and thereby enhance global cooperation. The GCTF has 30 founding members and five working groups, one of which is focused on Countering Violent Extremism and is co-chaired by the United Kingdom and the UAE.⁸ While independent from the GCTF, the Hedayah Centre was established in response to calls from GCTF members and the wider international community for the establishment of an independent, multilateral centre devoted to training, dialogue, collaboration and research to counter violent extremism in all of its forms and manifestations.⁹ In expressing his view on the need for a holistic approach to the phenomenon of radicalism and terrorism in the region that looks beyond the purely military dimension, Kılınc emphasised the importance of international cooperation, the exchange of best practices and lessons learnt from past experiences in the region and further afield. Outlining the recent activities of the Hedayah Centre in the realm of promoting counter-narratives and de-radicalisation policies, Kılınc highlighted the Centre's partnership on media and message training with the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) as well other efforts aimed at improving the exchange of best practices, such as the Hague-Marrakech Memorandum, reached in February 2014 under the auspices of the GCTF.¹⁰

Session III: De-Radicalisation and the dynamic interaction between religion and politics

The final session of the conference allowed participants to delve deeper into the complex relationship between religion and politics in the Middle East and North Africa and examine how each has impacted the spread of radicalism and instability in the region. **Matteo Legrenzi**, Associate Professor at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, opened the proceedings by emphasising that regime security and survival, understood in both material and ideational terms, remains the primary objective of regional states and that most of the policy actions of these can therefore be explained through the prism of geopolitics and regime balancing. Indeed, as was outlined in the earlier sessions of the conference, it is the political rather than purely religious or ethnic drivers that are fuelling regional instability in the Middle East. While the 1979 revolution in Iran did precipitate a worsening of regional rivalries and competition which were often framed in terms of Arab vs. Iranian or Sunni vs. Shi'a, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq further complicated the regional

⁸ For more information on the GCTF please visit the website, <https://www.thegctf.org/home>.

⁹ See the Hedayah Fact Sheet 2015, <http://www.hedayah.ae/pdf/hedayah-fact-sheet-eng-2015.pdf>.

¹⁰ GCTF, *The Hague-Marrakech Memorandum on Good Practices for a More Effective Response to the FTF Phenomenon*, 19 September 2014, https://www.thegctf.org/documents/10162/159879/14Sept19_The+Hague-Marrakech+FTF+Memorandum.pdf.

security landscape by allowing Iran to break through its regional isolation and establish closer, direct links with Iraq, Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon. This in turn increased the threat perception of the Arab Gulf States, in particular Saudi Arabia which since the advent of the 2011 Arab uprisings appears to have shed its traditional aversion for risk taking in foreign policy and has consequently stepped up its regional activism independently from the United States in such places as Bahrain, Egypt, Syria and most recently Yemen.

Behind the recent upsurge in violence and instability, therefore, rests what Legrenzi termed the new Middle East proxy-wars pitting regional states (and their international backers) against one another in a struggle for regime survival and influence. Expanding on the thesis put forth by Gregory Gause III in *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War*,¹¹ Legrenzi preferred the term new proxy-wars to describe the complex and overlapping struggles being played out in the Persian Gulf, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya. Within these struggles the use of identity politics, including sectarian narratives, as a tool of foreign policy has greatly contributed to regional animosity and mistrust, in turn further entrenching inter-state rivalries and instability. Such rivalries are not limited to Sunni vs. Shi'a however and indeed also include intra-Sunni disagreements such as those between Turkey and Qatar on one side and Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Al-Sisi's Egypt on the other. One example that demonstrates how inter-state rivalry linked to feelings of regime insecurity continues to preclude the emergence of positive, win-win scenarios is given by the failure of Arab Gulf States to transform the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) into a true military alliance, complete with a united standing army. This failure, which Legrenzi described as very likely to persist into the future, is explained by virtue of the persistent mistrust between Gulf States and fears of mutual meddling within the internal affairs of each. Given the high dependence of these states on the United States for their security needs, Arab Gulf States will continue to see less risks in relying on their offshore balancer for their security needs rather than sacrificing elements of sovereignty to potential adversaries in the region. In concluding his argument, Legrenzi noted that insecurity is likely to persist as long as Middle Eastern states continue to view the regional developments in zero-sum terms. While the recent P5+1 agreement with Iran on the nuclear issue is a potentially positive development capable of diminishing regional rivalries and leading to a de-escalation of tensions in the region, it is too early to tell if in fact this agreement will lead to positive spillovers throughout the region. Much will depend on the ability of the US, which will remain the primary outside player in the region, to generate incentives for regional states to limit their meddling in the internal affairs of weaker states and thereby create a more positive environment for trust building and regional cooperation. With Syria remaining a primary battleground for regional and international states, Legrenzi noted the bleak outlook for a political solution to the conflict, expressing his view that in the current circumstances diplomatic action should focus on strengthening and expanding a number of local

¹¹ F. Gregory Gause III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War", in *Brookings Doha Centre Analysis Papers*, No. 11 (July 2014), <http://brook.gs/1R0wDtC>.

truces in various locations of Syria in order to save civilian lives and slowly build up momentum towards the inevitable end goal of political solution to the war.

The final presentation in session three was delivered by **Şaban Ali Düzgün**, Professor and Head of the Theology Department at the University of Ankara, who performed a historical examination of the relationship between Islam and radicalism in the region. In opening his talk, Professor Düzgün quoted Karl Marx in pronouncing that in many respects the history of the Middle East is also the history of religions and that it is consequently hard to differentiate between the two, as religion and politics have long overlapped in the region. Monotheism, however, cannot be considered the sole source of radicalism and violence in the region and while the Crusades and other events are often cited as proof of the destabilising impact of religions, other important events such as the Mongol invasions had little or nothing to do with religion. Turning to address the contemporary media narrative that has increasingly associated Islam with radicalism and violence in the region, the Professor recalled Islam's rich heritage of coexistence and harmony, as evidenced by Islam's major Medieval centres of learning in Damascus and Cordoba, from where the term "convivencia" emerged. Today, however, and for a number of reasons that have little to do with Islam or religious faith, Damascus has been transformed into a centre for radicalisation and violence, in many respects mirroring that which occurred in post-2003 Baghdad, another major historical centre of Islamic learning.

Addressing to present rise and appeal of the radical religious ideologies of Daesh and other groups, Düzgün emphasised the need for major Muslim countries to develop a counter-narrative couched in religious terms and which is capable of reviving and reinvigorating Islam's past heritage of moderation. The challenge, as is the case with other religious texts, is that there exists no single interpretation of the Koran, with many passages that can be taken out of context and used to justify violent acts. Indeed, while radical mosques and preachers tend to focus solely on those verses and passages which can be interpreted to meet their radical goals, the Koran contains many other verses that directly contradict these. It is the responsibility of Muslim leaders and governments to harness these passages and promote a more holistic reading of the Koran and Islam's other holy texts. Only by confronting the radical message exposed by such groups as Daesh head-on and by promoting a different, more moderate interpretation of Islam can the influence and appeal of such groups be curtailed. Military means are important, but it is the ideological threat that represents the true, long-term challenge posed by these groups. In closing his talk, Professor Düzgün reminded his audience that the West must do more to counter the growing Islamophobia in the media and certain political quarters in Europe and the United States, narratives which are contributing to the spread of more radical, uncompromising interpretations of Islam and more generally feed into the divisive and largely ahistorical thesis of a perennial clash of civilisations between "East" and "West."

Conclusion

Concluding remarks were delivered by **Emiliano Alessandri**, Programme Officer at the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna, and **Lorenzo Kamel**, IAI/Harvard, both of whom were involved in the organisational phases of the conference. In thanking the participants and organisers, both speakers highlighted the benefits drawn from adopting a mixed academic and policy-oriented approach to debates on the contemporary and root drivers of instability and radicalism: Alessandri summarised OSCE's main initiatives in the field of countering violent extremism and radicalisation that lead to terrorism, including relevant decisions adopted at the 22nd OSCE Ministerial Council in Belgrade. It was noted by both Kamel and Alessandri that adding historical context to the current debate helps diminish the possibility of adopting faulty or simplistic policy-prescriptions that are excessively influenced by ongoing emergencies and sometimes misleading media narratives. In lacking a more in-depth understanding of the complex mixture of drivers that have contributed, over many years, to the present circumstances in the region, such policy (re)actions may at best result in short-term tactical solutions, and even some successes, but in the long-term fail to address many of those underlining drivers that have led to the spread of radicalism and instability in the Euro-Mediterranean region and beyond.

Final remarks were delivered by **Fatma Ceren Yazgan**, Deputy Director General for Security and Intelligence Affairs at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who reiterated how radicalism and instability are not phenomena that are particular to the Mediterranean and instead are manifestations of trends that have many parallels in various regions of the world, irrespective of culture, ethnicity or religion. Religion, therefore, whatever its incarnation, is not the only, or even the primary, lens through which to examine the present trends taking place in the Mediterranean and Middle East. Power, security and legitimacy, of state and non-state actors in the region and further afield, remain the primary drivers lurking behind the persistence of intra-state rivalry in the region, in turn leading to a regional landscape characterised by entrenched mistrust and zero-sum competition. Neo-realism, regime balancing and geopolitical competition remain useful frameworks for the study of international relations in the MENA region and given the present circumstances in the region, such approaches are likely to retain significance looking into the future. In thanking participants and the organisers before concluding her talk, the Turkish diplomat emphasised that while it is correct to say that Islam is not the primary driver for the present instability in the region, religion cannot be entirely decoupled from the present rise of such actors as Daesh or the Nusra Front. In order to counter the skewed and extreme interpretations of Islam put forth by these groups, Muslim countries – including Turkey – have a responsibility to promote effective counter-narratives. Such narratives must also be couched in religious terms in order to be effective and as such the role of religious leaders, scholars and imams remains highly important in promoting a more moderate interpretation of Islam and its teachings. Only by playing on the same field can the ideological threat posed by Daesh and other extremist groups in

the region be effectively curtailed and overcome. The Turkish diplomat concluded her speech by thanking IAI, ORSAM and the New-Med network for the fruitful contribution to a policy debate that will continue in the context of OSCE and other relevant fora.

Updated 28 December 2015

Conference Programme

Ankara, 14 December 2015

Opening Session

Introductory Remarks

Şaban Kardaş, Centre for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM), Ankara

Massimo Carnelos, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

Keynote Address

Ibrahim Kalin, Presidency of the Republic of Turkey

Session 1

How It Was, How It Is: Root Causes of the Current Regional Instability

Key questions: What is the mix of root causes and contingent factors behind processes leading to instability and violent radicalisation in the Mediterranean region? Are these causes linked, as often claimed, to a "Middle Eastern exceptionalism"? What role does religion play? What role do unsolved conflicts play? What is the link between the macro level (geopolitical competition, weak governance, conflict) and the micro level (individuals and groups embracing radicalisation in their respective communities)? How the equilibrium between the local regional "minorities" and "majorities" were in the past? What are the main new aspects, if any?

Chair **Emiliano Alessandri**, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Vienna

Panelists **Toby Matthiesen**, Oxford University

Moshe Ma'oz, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Lorenzo Kamel, Harvard University and Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome

Benoît Challand, New School for Social Research, New York

Session 2

The Phenomenon of "Foreign Terrorist Fighters" Explained

Key questions: What do we know and what lessons have we learned from the apparently burgeoning phenomenon of so-called "foreign terrorist fighters" leaving their homes in neighboring countries and regions to join conflicts in the Middle East? Is this phenomenon truly new or have only the scope and the modalities evolved? In which way radicalisation processes intersect with the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters? What role can anti-radicalisation policies and campaigns play in the mix of strategies aimed at stemming the phenomenon?

Panelists **Lisa Watanabe**, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH),
Zürich
Dietrich Jung, University of Southern Denmark, Odense
Haldun Yalçınkaya, TOBB University of Economics and
Technology, Ankara
Cemil Kılınc, Hedayah Center, Abu Dhabi

Session 3

De-Radicalisation and the Dynamic Interaction between Religion and Politics

Key questions: Which roles do religion, nationalism and religious nationalism play in the processes unfolding in the MENA? Do religions explain dynamics of conflict or merely provide manifestations of it? What role can religious traditions and religious leaders play in countering radicalisation processes? In which ways interreligious and intra-religious dialogue help?

Chair **Necati Anaz**, International Center for Terrorism and
Transnational Crime (UTSAM), Ankara

Panelists **Matteo Legrenzi**, Ca' Foscari University of Venice
Şaban Ali Düzgün, University of Ankara

Concluding Remarks

Emiliano Alessandri, Organisation for Security and Co-operation
in Europe (OSCE), Vienna
Fatma Ceren Yazgan, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Lorenzo Kamel, Harvard University and Istituto Affari
Internazionali (IAI), Rome

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Founded by Altiero Spinelli in 1965, does research in the fields of foreign policy, political economy and international security. A non-profit organisation, the IAI aims to further and disseminate knowledge through research studies, conferences and publications. To that end, it cooperates with other research institutes, universities and foundations in Italy and abroad and is a member of various international networks. More specifically, the main research sectors are: European institutions and policies; Italian foreign policy; trends in the global economy and internationalisation processes in Italy; the Mediterranean and the Middle East; defence economy and policy; and transatlantic relations. The IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffariInternazionali*), two series of research papers (*Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Papers*) and other papers' series related to IAI research projects.

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