

## **Religious Extremism in Syria: A New Launching Pad for Global Terrorism?**

### **Date:**

2 May 2014

### **Conference Organized by:**

Institute for Near Eastern Studies, University of Vienna  
Terrorism Research Initiative

### **Registration and Fee:**

Due to limited seating at the venue, registration for this event is mandatory. The Registration Fee for the Conference is 40 EUR/ per prospective attendee, which includes a light lunch of Middle Eastern food. To register, please purchase your ticket here:

<http://www.eventbrite.com/e/religious-extremism-in-syria-a-new-launching-pad-for-global-terrorism-tickets-11198487979>

For any issues regarding registration, please contact Nico Prucha ([nico.prucha@univie.ac.at](mailto:nico.prucha@univie.ac.at)).

### **Location:**

Albert Schweitzer Haus, Vienna, Austria. Registered participants will be informed of additional details concerning the venue within an appropriate time frame.

### **Conference Abstract:**

With no end in sight, the West remains at a crossroads of how to deal with the implications of the turmoil in Syria. The rise of confessional warfare and the effective recruitment of foreign fighters from the greater Middle East, Europe and beyond to join militant factions in Syria have implications far beyond the current conflict zones. The professional use of Social Media to attract young males for the cause and to raise funds has reached an unprecedented dimension that could perhaps transform Syria into a similar, if not worse, launching pad for global terrorism than Afghanistan. This one-day conference builds on the previous work of the Syrian Engagement Project and seeks to provide insight into a set of overlapping issues surrounding the Syrian conflict and its implications for Europe and the international community. The conference will bring together an interdisciplinary set of speakers to provide insight into extremist and other militant actors in the conflict and the implications for regional and international security.

**Agenda:**

- 09:00 Registration
- 09:30 Opening remarks, introductions, programme review, and administrative announcements by Nico Prucha
- 09:45 Tom Keatinge, Independent Analyst, “The Syrian Conflict and the Importance of Financing.”
- 10:15 Maura Conway, Dublin City University, “Assessing the Role of Social Media in the Syria Conflict.”
- 10:45 Tea and coffee break with oriental snacks
- 11:15 Joas Wagemakers, Radboud University Nijmegen, “Jordanian Salafis and the Syrian Conflict.”
- 11:45 Rüdiger Lohlker, University of Vienna, “True Romance: A New Paradigm for Jihadis in Syria and Beyond?”
- 12:15 Morning panel discussion
- 13:00 Lunch break
- 14:00 Nico Prucha, University of Vienna, “The Sectarian Divide in Syria as the Rationale of The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria to Indoctrinate, Radicalize and Recruit Foreign Fighters”
- 14:30 Mahan Abedin, Dysart Consulting, “The Role of IRGC Qods Cops as Force Multiplier in the Syrian War.”
- 15:00 Tea and Coffee break with light snacks
- 15:30 Iranian Embassy Representative (Invited, TBC)
- 16:00 Syrian Embassy Representative (Invited, TBC)
- 16:30 Robert Wesley, Terrorism Research Initiative, “Why Egypt Matters in the Context of the Current Syrian Civil War.”
- 17:00 Afternoon panel discussion
- 18:00 Concluding Remarks and Farewell

## **Speaker Abstracts and Bios**

### **“The Syrian Conflict and the Importance of Financing”**

In considering the ways in which insurgencies and violence perpetuate and in seeking to influence or curtail such struggles one often overlooked factor is finance. The availability of funding, the distribution of funding, and the sources of funding are critical issues to consider when seeking to address an ongoing conflict such as the one we are witnessing in Syria. The nature of the funding of conflict has changed dramatically in recent years. In the case of the Syrian conflict, whilst funds from states such as Russia, Iran, the US, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey support various elements, a key factor to consider in addressing extremist groups is the funding provided by private donors, donors who are in most cases attracted by the concept of ‘jihadi finance’, donors who, for whatever reason are unable to travel to fight but who seek the honour and heavenly reward of waging jihad by proxy.

In his presentation, Tom Keatinge will consider the changing face of insurgent financing, considering the history of insurgent and extremist financing through recent conflicts, focusing in particular on the highly influential nature of private donor financing in the current conflict in Syria and how Europe and the international community can address a key factor in the continuation of this three year-old war.

*Tom Keatinge is a former investment banker at J.P. Morgan and an analyst of terrorist and extremist financing. He holds an MA in Intelligence & International Security from King’s College London.*

### **“Jordanian Salafis and the Syrian Conflict”**

The presentation of Joas Wagemakers will address the Syrian conflict among (Jihadi-) Salafis in Jordan. Unlike earlier regional conflicts, like the ones in Afghanistan and Iraq, this conflict is relatively uncontroversial among Jordanian (Jihadi-) Salafis for both local Jordanian reasons as well as reasons that are specific to the Salafi community in Jordan in its quietist and jihadi variants. Although old fissures in the Jihadi-Salafi community in Jordan have recently arisen over which of the militant Islamist groups to support in Syria, the fight against President Bashar al-Asad has mostly united Jordanian Salafis in a way that previous conflicts have not. This presentation will argue that this probably accounts for the relatively large number of Jordanians fighting in Syria.

*Joas Wagemakers is an assistant professor and post-doctoral research fellow of Islamic Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. His research has focused on Salafism and Islamism, particularly their ideological underpinnings, with a geographical focus on Jordan, the Palestinian territories, Saudi Arabia and international discourse. He has published widely in international peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes, most recently in the *Middle East Journal* (2014, vol. 68, no. 1), and his publications include "A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi" (Cambridge University Press, 2012). He also blogs at [Jihadica.com](http://Jihadica.com), a weblog on international developments in jihad, and*

*co-edits ZemZem, a Dutch-language journal on the Middle East, North Africa and Islam.*

### **“Assessing the Role of Social Media in the Syria Conflict”**

Making an accurate assessment of the role of online social media in conflict is fraught with difficulty. Online social media is nevertheless being widely portrayed by policymakers and in mass media as a crucial component of the Syria conflict, particularly in a European context with respect to the ‘recruitment’ of so-called ‘foreign fighters.’ This presentation will open by describing and analysing the framing of the social media components of the Syria conflict by policymakers, both within European Union member states and at the EU-level, and in Europe’s English-language press. The second part will provide an overview of social media activity surrounding the Syria conflict across a wide range of online platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, by a diffuse array of actors, including pro-regime, anti-regime, and a diversity of other contributors. It will conclude with a discussion of the difficulty from a social science perspective of evidencing social media’s impacts on/in the conflict, with particular attention paid to the problems surrounding research into the role of social media in ‘recruitment’ of ‘foreign fighters.’

*Dr. Maura Conway’s principal research interests are in the area of terrorism and the Internet, including academic and media discourses on cyberterrorism, the functioning and effectiveness of violent political extremist online content, and violent online radicalisation. She has presented on these issues before the United Nations in New York, the Commission of the European Union in Brussels, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in London, and elsewhere. Her articles have appeared in, amongst others, Current History, First Monday, Media, War & Conflict, and Parliamentary Affairs. Maura is Senior Lecturer in International Security in the School of Law and Government at Dublin City University (DCU) in Dublin, Ireland and Principal Investigator on VOX-Pol, a major EU-funded project on violent online political extremism.*

### **“True Romance: A New Paradigm for Jihadis in Syria and Beyond?”**

Approaching the problem of jihadi online propaganda requires a thorough examination of content and context to associate meaning and to develop assessments of impact and evolution. This presentation will demonstrate an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of online propaganda using two examples of ‘propaganda memes’. Two propaganda memes being currently utilized by jihadis in the Syrian conflict will be analyzed: the female fighter and the jihadi as a humanitarian. Rather than theoretical elaborations, both examples can be viewed as symptoms of jihadi efforts to reframe the practical aspects of jihadi concepts and activities on the ground in Syria. The presentation is designed to provide a fresh perspective on propaganda analysis.

*Rüdiger Lohlker is professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Vienna, Austria. He has conducted research on jihadi online activities for about 15 years. Currently he is focusing on analyzing the visual impact of jihadi propaganda in social media. Other fields of research include Salafism and Arab Hackers. He has*

*written frequently on these issues and is editor of the series Studying Jihadism at Vienna University Press, and Jihadism and Terrorism Logos.*

**“The Sectarian Divide in Syria as the Rationale of The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria to Indoctrinate, Radicalize and Recruit Foreign Fighters”**

The professional use of Social Media to attract young males for the cause of jihadist groups and to raise funds has reached an unprecedented dimension that could perhaps transform Syria into a similar, if not worse, launching pad for global terrorism than Afghanistan. This paper will focus on the professional use of the new media by *The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria* (ISIS) to reach out with highly appealing audio-visual incitement material to Muslims worldwide. With an increase of foreign fighters among the ranks of ISIS from the European Union and the United States, the accounts of these televised foreign fighters are analyzed and contextualized within the broader data-set of ISIS propaganda. The rationale of these foreign fighters is perhaps most appealing to Islamic communities in their respective countries of origin, as grievances and the framing of ‘injustices’ varies while the ideology is tied into Arabic ideology and religious reasoning.

By studying the Arabic and non-Arabic agitprop material with insight into the conflict in Syria we must develop localized policy recommendations on how governments deal with the issue of prevention and coping with returnees from Syria. A framework of interdisciplinary agencies, ranging from social workers to intelligence and academics, as is the case in The Netherlands, or Sweden, may develop best practices used as a potential example for other governments.

*Nico Prucha of the University of Vienna focuses on jihadi online activities related to Syria and the organized opposition. He is a fellow at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH), University of Hamburg. His research centres on textual and audio-visual content analysis of al-Qa`ida activity online, specifically focusing on jihadist Shari`a law interpretation of hostage taking and executions. He has written frequently on the subject and blogs for Jihadica.com*

**“Why Egypt Matters in the Context of the Current Syrian Civil War”**

In his presentation, Robert Wesley will discuss the ongoing conflict in Syria and its relationship to political and security developments in Egypt. The presentation will serve to highlight the regional and international implications of the current conflicts and their interconnectivity. Special emphasis will be placed on militant actors in each country and include discussion of ideology and governmental responses. Also to be discussed are the potential implications for Syria of the efforts by Egypt and other states to label as terrorist entities and pursue legal recourse against ‘moderate’ Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

*Robert Wesley is the President of the Terrorism Research Initiative, a non-profit research institution focused on advancing human security through collaborative research. He is also a Principal of Cognitive Architectures, a security consultancy. He previously served as an official of the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency.*

## **“The Role of IRGC Qods Cops as Force Multiplier in the Syrian War”**

In his presentation, Abedin will discuss the IRGC Qods force as the most technically capable protagonist in the international proxy war that is unfolding in Syria. The force is also arguably the most ideologically committed in so far as it represents the cutting edge of the IRGC, Iran’s ideological parallel army. Whilst the force’s deployment in Syria is relatively small (in the mid hundreds according to the best estimates), nonetheless it has been instrumental in turning the tide of the war by placing Syrian rebels at a technical and to a lesser extent ideological disadvantage.

The Qods force acts as a force multiplier in the Syrian conflict in three crucial ways. First, the Iranians have helped set up and train the National Defence Force which has been more effective than the Syrian army in not only fighting the rebels but crucially in holding and protecting liberated territory. Second, the Qods force has been instrumental in facilitating the entry of Lebanese Hezbollah into the theatre at a strategic level by creating a command and control structure that integrates Hezbollah with both the NDF and the Syrian army. Third, the Iranians are engaging in direct combat against some of the most professional and committed elements in the Syrian rebel movement in and around Aleppo with a view to preparing the ground for a major Syrian offensive on rebel strongholds in the north.

*Mahan Abedin is the Director of Research at the London-based Centre for the Study of Terrorism. Previously he was the Editor of Islamism Digest and the Jamestown Foundation’s Terrorism Monitor. Abedin is also the Managing Director of Dysart Consulting, a public relations and research organisation. Widely recognised as an analyst of Iranian politics, Abedin is a regular contributor to Persian-language media.*